

“SO WE DROVE ON TOWARDS DEATH”: RELEASE AND MECHANIZED VIOLENCE IN
THE GREAT GATSBY

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ABSTRACT

Eric J. Leed postulates a theory of restraint and release as formative forces in the trenches of the European fronts. I examine F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* for its portrayal of release that is tied to the presence of automobile "accidents." These events emblemize the suppressed memory of mechanized violence. My first chapter addresses Gatsby and his fantasy of release in pursuing Daisy and the implications of release for morality in the post-war world. My second chapter is concerned with Tom Buchanan, whose traditional ideas about "civilization" are juxtaposed with the mechanistic violence of his defense of those ideals. My third chapter explores the relationships the novel's characters possess to the automobile as a character, and further, how automobility enables release. My conclusion will synthesize the evidence in Fitzgerald's novel to make observations about the disconnect, forged out of a new age of mechanized warfare, between individuals and their actions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the onset of the First World War, mechanized warfare ushered in a new age of combat. Machine guns could mow down men's bodies as if they were saplings, and artillery was now capable of lobbing shells for miles to assail with impunity distant enemy fortifications, effectively removing a soldier's ability to face his enemy directly. Separated from the traditional means by which individual wills were expressed on the battlefield, soldiers were forced to shelter themselves in deep trenches, which constituted a new world stripped of responsibility or agency, a world in which the results of actions taken were hidden from view along with the enemy. In his book on the topic of common frameworks for negotiating identity during the First World War, Eric J. Leed explores the concept of human autonomy and control over reality, particularly as it relates to the term "machine" and to the idea of technology as a force mediating reality and action. He identifies the key questions that accompanied the ubiquitous use of machines in the Great War: "to what extent is 'man' gaining or losing control over himself, over his fate, his environment?" (150). These questions are directly related to the larger problem of "the ultimate fate of humanity within industrial civilization" (150). Leed's exploration of human autonomy in the presence of mechanistic warfare is helpful in understanding the psychological impact of technology upon the post-war period, particularly as it relates to the restraints that machines had placed upon individuals and upon their desires. These restraints created, perforce, new tensions

between action and inaction, between ideals and realities, and between an internal desire for purpose and the seeming randomness of the external world. These restraints resulted in a demand for release that had to be answered.

In addition to his consideration of autonomy, Leed engages with Ernst Jünger's ideas about the "fantasies of release" entertained by soldiers following the War. Jünger, like so many others, experienced a profound shift toward internality as a result of the disappointment and disillusion he faced in the war. Instead of the romanticized, pre-modern battlefield that had lent soldiers opportunity to overcome their low-born rank through chivalry and leadership in combat, a form of release that had come to constitute traditional ideals of manhood and valor in the Western world, the horrors of mechanized warfare had stolen any sense of purpose in battle: "The enemy had disappeared behind a mask of machinery that prevented any confrontation or observation The war was not a test of individual capacities and wills but the suppression of everything that gave value to the individual" (Leed 156). Thus, the idealistic expectations engendered by tradition in the generation that would fight the bloodiest battles of the twentieth century without ever having previously known war in any intimate way went unfulfilled, resulting in a form of constraint placed upon the imagination, a constraint that served to defer the human spirit, or perhaps to redirect it, until the Great War had drawn to a close.

The concepts of restraint, imposed by the strictures of war and the long periods of tense inactivity endured by soldiers at the front, and of release, which was afforded only by the marches across No Man's Land that claimed countless lives, are the irreconcilable forces at play in the post-war world. Leed explains the end result of this congruence of pent-up energies, as it was given expression during advances upon enemy lines: "The offensive here is the act that

resolves all inhibitions. It permits those who have accumulated in trenches and shell holes to behave like freebooters and robbers free of any morality or conscience” (159). This tension between life lived enslaved to fear and constrained by stagnation and the suicidal act of violence that led not to valor but to anonymous graves haunted troops throughout the war. These concepts were not limited, however, to wartime activities, but also found their way into modern civilian conceptions of morality.

In Italy, some viewed war as a justification for anarchy as a force for not only social, but also moral change. F. T. Marinetti, the father of the Futurist movement in the arts, envisioned dramatic changes in the human spirit which broke violently from tradition to establish a new sensibility characterized by a creative destruction of the past. Within this view, the emphasis for all of human effort is placed upon the abandonment and violent undoing of all that is not actively moving forward through extreme action. While his 1909 antebellum Manifesto proposes a naïve, highly bellicose view that was focused upon the art *avant garde* and was unfamiliar with the actual atrocities of mechanized warfare, war would serve to refine the movement’s views. Marinetti’s later 1916 treatise, then, proposed a deified role for speed and dynamism in the post-War world that reflected not only the perceived need for anarchical revolution but also for a shift in humanity’s relationship to machines and to itself in a kind of artistic refashioning. He begins by boldly stating, “Today [Christian morality] has lost its reason for existing, because it has been emptied of all divinity” (94). The “Futurist morality,” as Marinetti sees it, will be the true cure for man’s decay, the source of which, he states, has been memory, analysis, repose and habit, rather than war (94). Marinetti asserts that man’s mastery of creation through the use of machines and the velocity they lend constitutes not a source of disillusion, but a new morality that does,

and should, shape the modern world, providing, perhaps, the answer to the modern drive for release. That which is pure within this new framework is characterized by movement and continual newness at whatever cost, while repose is viewed as mortal sin. Speed is “aggressive and warlike,” slowness “pacifistic and passive” (95). Celerity is modernity and slowness nostalgia for a bygone age, an age which had participated in “idealization of exhaustion and rest” and mistrusted the unexplored (95-96). In Italian Futurism we might observe an ideology that celebrated release, seeking to utilize the selfsame mechanized forces that had demolished the human soul to recreate mankind in its own image. The end result of this proposed transformation is openly identified as being a “nonhuman and mechanical being, constructed for an omnipresent velocity,” which “will be naturally cruel, omniscient, and combative” (91). Certainly, the atrocities of war, perpetrated by men wielding new technology, the destructive capabilities of which was outside of their understanding, might be understood as a precursor to this shift in the form and function of humanity.

While there is certainly significant precedence for the impact of machines, and particularly of mechanized warfare, upon the modern psyche, little has been written applying the lens of Italian Futurism to the problem of forced restraint and the desire for release that manifested itself in the literature of the period immediately following the Great War. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the subject of this thesis, we can observe a string of accidents in which automobiles serve as embodiments of speed closely tied to the cruel morality suggested by Marinetti. Fitzgerald characterizes this new moral force in terms of the “carelessness” displayed most strongly by Tom, Daisy, and Jordan, and by the restlessness experienced by all. Tom’s infidelity is revealed during the first of these violent collisions, establishing a pattern of

deception leading to Daisy's accidental murder of Myrtle in the "death car" (a significant moniker in itself) and the deaths of both Gatsby and Wilson.

Fitzgerald's novel includes descriptions of the various ways in which characters conceive of themselves as being aligned with vehicles, such as Nick's description of himself as both a "careless" driver and a car with "brakes" on his own desires, and these details illustrate the relationship each character possesses to the idea of release. Further, I will argue, the vehicles themselves enable release through a kind of automotive agency, in some ways becoming characters themselves. Concepts of restraint and release resonate strongly with the actions of both Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway--while Gatsby finds himself unable to experience completion in his acquisition of wealth, of status, or even of Daisy, Nick also fails to find satisfaction in the wild promises of the world he returns to following the war. They exhibit "a tense equilibrium" that fuels their actions, whether in the form of Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of Daisy or Nick's drive to chronicle the life and dream of the narrative's eponymous millionaire (162). In both cases, there is a willingness to cross boundaries in order to find release--Gatsby's attempt to reclaim the love of a married woman is made through his fabulous wealth gained by dubious means, while Nick's involvement with their affair sets the stage for tragic death.

Ultimately, we can see that both men fit into the framework Leed points out in Jünger's work and into that proposed in the work of the Italian Futurists during the war, because they have experienced "energies enormously compressed," finding release "only in the garb provided by fantasy" that, in the post-war world, is both violent and mechanized (Leed 162). Reserve and release play important roles in *The Great Gatsby*, then, and point us towards a Futurist understanding of the violence in the novel as this violence is closely tied to the presence of

automobiles, emblematic of the trauma produced by mechanized warfare. A careful examination of Fitzgerald's novel through the lens of Futurism and the unique forces at work both in the novel and the world in which the novel was written reveals, I will argue, a willingness to abandon moral responsibility in favor of an outlet for release. In order to achieve the release described by Jünger in the post-war world, the characters of *The Great Gatsby* place the blame for their own actions upon outside forces, frequently cars, a move that developed out of the loss of agency brought about by the advent of the age of mechanization, which F. T. Marinetti praises as salvation for the individual seeking release. Mechanized violence in the modern world firmly placed individuals in the driver seat of a vehicle they could not control, and the death we observe in the accidents of *The Great Gatsby* is the inevitable result. Carelessness, which defines several characters in the novel in various ways, is the end result of the loss of agency, and Italian Futurism provides both a theoretical perspective and a cultural context helpful for analyzing the literature of the post-war period for its underlying violence and drive for release.

Though my specific focus, as detailed above, has not been addressed directly in the body of criticism, a handful of critics touch upon similar themes without explicitly making the connections that I will draw between the First World War and the impact of mechanized warfare upon the resulting ideas of restraint and release. Michael Tratner's 2001 *Deficits and Desires*, for instance, concerns itself with the effects of restraint and release in the arena of economics during the 1920s, which Tratner recognizes as having explicitly moral repercussions for the modern age. For the common person, the civilian who had never known life in the trenches of the European fronts, release manifested itself in a new form of consumerism which encouraged the consumption of goods bought on credit. This unprecedented shift was tied to changes in the post-

war economy: “Consumer credit exploded in the 1920s due to two developments: the mass production of automobiles and government legislation that legalized practices that had been morally condemned for centuries. . . . Once people realized they could own without first saving, they would lose all moral fiber” (73). Tratner observes the same lack of responsibility that can be seen in the atrocities committed by soldiers in mechanized warfare. There is separation between one’s actions as agent and the destructive end result. Borrowing on credit, like launching a shell toward the enemy line, is a cause far distanced from its effect.

The impact of this new credit economy upon both civilians and returning soldiers following the war can be clearly seen in *The Great Gatsby*. While Tratner views the novel’s treatment of restraint and release in terms of post-war economics, I will examine Fitzgerald’s story in terms of the impact of mechanized war upon those involved in combat. My project is indebted to Michael Tratner’s study because it serves as the flip side of the issue at hand, a kind of civilian analogue to the plight of soldiers at the front. The connections that are drawn in Tratner’s chapter on *The Great Gatsby* are helpful and significant to an understanding of the post-war world, but touch little upon the costs of physical and psychic damage brought about by mechanized warfare.

War’s influence upon the psyches of combatants could not be restricted to the trenches, but overflowed from the front into civilian life not only in economics, but also in every corner of daily life. In her 2013 book on the concept of the “New Death” brought about by the changes in warfare during the First World War, Pearl James dedicates a chapter to her treatment of Fitzgerald’s novel as being told by a shell-shocked narrator. James proposes that the “accidents” that pepper the novel provide a system for understanding the ways in which these events reveal

an underlying suppression of wartime violence and trauma in both Nick's narration and Gatsby's account of his own past. James reveals the deep influence of "new" and mechanized death upon the psyches of characters living in a post-war era that is, nonetheless, shaped by the same violence and drive for speed that characterized the Italian movement of Futurism. I will seek to advance James's work by expanding the conversation on mechanized violence in *Gatsby* to include the concept of restraint and release as it underlies the accidents she identifies as the *foci* of violence structuring Nick's narrative.

In addition to the impact of warfare upon the popular conception of death and violence done to bodies, there was an undermining of ideals concerning the spirit of the United States. For generations, this spirit had been closely related to the concept of the American "self-made man," which had been postulated by significant figures from Benjamin Franklin to Frederick Douglass, offering the hope of self-improvement through hard work and opportunity. However, for a returning veteran like Jay Gatsby, an inability to adapt to civilian life often precluded the possibility of realizing such a self-concept and could result in frustration and violent behavior or psychosis. This obstruction of healthy channels for hope encouraged a rejection of the future for the sake of reclaiming the pre-war past. Many critics have drawn connections between the violence of the closing action of *The Great Gatsby* and the failure of a uniquely American "dream" of prosperity and self-fashioning, the myth that the strength of the individual can yield the financial success, social mobility, and personal fulfillment of that dream. Nick's reflections upon the origins of the nation, of "a fresh, green breast of the new world" that "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes," evoke a sense of historical import that comes to constitute the foundation

for the dream that has characterized Gatsby (189). However, in Gatsby's imagination, the past has lost its efficacy, because he, unlike the first settlers, has failed to consider the future.

George Monteiro interrogates Fitzgerald's use of a historical lens in relationship to the accounts of Christopher Columbus and the New World, which the author likely referenced. By doing so, Monteiro locates the difficulties that the novel's characters face when confronted with "the hard truths of history," facts that both inspire Nick and Jay's fascination with the past and drive both men to try to capture it, or, in Gatsby's case, repeat it (161). The story that Fitzgerald records via Nick, then, is the story of Gatsby's "capacity for wonder," the imaginative force of will which he shares with the Dutch settlers, a force he hopes will return Daisy to him. The concept of release provides a point of connection between war and the past, extending beyond the scope of Monteiro's essay to an understanding of Fitzgerald's use of history as an overarching theme in *The Great Gatsby*.

History plays an important role in Gatsby's self-conception, as Barbara Will demonstrates. She explores the narrative of the American dream in Fitzgerald's novel; wonder, she argues, becomes the link between Jay's own personal narrative, his history and that of the collectivist ideal of the American dream: "What matters to Gatsby is what matters to 'us'; Gatsby's story is 'our' story; his fate and the fate of the nation are intertwined" (126). By connecting Gatsby to the original settlers, Will suggests, Fitzgerald "[establishes] 'America' as eternal mode of human yearning, as a quest narrative that stretches across generations," therefore restoring proper signification for the American dream. While Will's argument is highly insightful, I will seek to complicate it by replacing her claim that Gatsby is driven by "the

evanescent and the intangible” with an examination of the force of release that underlies this hope in the unreal.

The intangible often finds its expression in religious imagery. Roger L. Pearson has framed *The Great Gatsby* in terms of a religious system in which the American dream has become corrupt and is presided over by Jay Gatsby. The fictions which the mysterious millionaire crafts about himself are at once in alignment with the ideal of the American “self-made man,” the “messiah who was to be the epitome of the word ‘American,’” and characterized by the “failure and destruction [which] serve as a portent for the eclipse of the American dream, and the passing away of an era” (639). Gatsby’s hedonism is the driving force behind his corrupted “gospel” and thus the American dream he has come to represent is likewise perverse and untenable; thus, the national outlet for the individual’s energies is revealed to be insufficient, even dangerous-- “[the] American dream is, in reality, a nightmare” (645). Here Pearson’s argument nears my own in his acknowledgement of a drive for release that feeds off a national vision for fulfillment clouded and warped in the wake of a disillusioning world of mechanized warfare.

Having established a foundation for my argument, I will begin by identifying the forces which eliminated traditional ideas of identity formation in warfare during the first quarter of the twentieth century, as well as those factors which created a desire for release both physical and psychic. Within this context of wartime constraints upon the human spirit and upon the male body, I discuss the accidents of Fitzgerald’s text and their impact upon individual characters or sets of characters in *The Great Gatsby*. The first of these chapters will be concerned with Jay Gatsby himself, who is perhaps the strongest illustration of the concepts of restraint and release

in the novel. By focusing on the process by which he seeks to fulfill his personal fantasy of release in his pursuit of Daisy, I will examine the impact of mechanized violence upon morality and concepts of self-fashioning.

My second chapter will address the character of Tom Buchanan and his search for release. As a representative of both the pre-war world in his established connections to “old money” and traditional ideas of “civilization” and to the more modern world of mechanical violence evoked elsewhere in the novel, his turn to mechanization for the sake of defending his status is significant. Tom plays a unique role as a foil for Gatsby, the post-war New Man, simultaneously representing an older form of masculinity, that of Michael Kimmel’s genteel patriarch, and participating in the post-war world of mechanized violence. While he possesses the wealth and land that would belong to this masculine type, he nonetheless exhibits mechanical characteristics that identify him with both an industrialized ideal of civilized manhood and an atavistic, instinctual violence.

In my third chapter, I will concern myself with the various instances in which driving an automobile shapes the story by enabling characters to negate the past or remove their own agency through their use of cars, beginning with an examination of the characters’ relationships to this particularly modern act before moving on to examine various ways in which the machines themselves might be viewed as characters in the novel. I will pay special attention to Fitzgerald’s comparisons between vehicles and individuals (i.e., Gatsby and his “circus wagon” or Daisy and her virginal white car) before moving on to look at the series of accidents that manifest the drives of the post-war world that seek release through violence.

Finally, my conclusion will synthesize the evidence I have examined in order to describe a world in which there is little responsibility because it has been stolen by mechanization, represented by the vast and seemingly unstoppable “war machine” described by Daniel Pick. This same sense of a lack of culpability was adopted by many in the early twentieth century as they questioned how it was that the war had begun, and this inability to locate blame for nearly worldwide conflict is echoed in the actions of Fitzgerald’s characters, particularly in their tendencies towards dangerous repetitions resulting from past trauma. Having been stripped of the guilt that should be associated with the various forms of release they pursue, the violence of the novel plays out in a series of unconscious repetitions that recapitulate the traumas of the past, pointing to the idea that modern humanity is doomed to repeat its mistakes, as it would do in the Second World War.

In *The Great Gatsby* the impact of mechanized warfare drives characters to act upon impulses generated by an intense need for release. Not unlike the members of nations participating in the unpredictably devastating war, Tom, Daisy, Nick and Jay take part in an escalating affair which ends in multiple deaths and indeterminable guilt. With no clear sense of blame or responsibility, those characters who survive are ultimately left to continue in their confusion, alienated from themselves and from each other in the aftermath of a search for an end to restraint. In the next two chapters, I will demonstrate how Fitzgerald contrasts Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan in order to showcase the varying forms of release which seek out violence that is mechanized and thus at odds with the pre-war world.

CHAPTER II

“A Platonic Conception of Himself”: Jay Gatsby and the Dangers of Fantastic Identity

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald paints his eponymous protagonist in contradictory terms, structuring Gatsby as a character who is defined by the veteran's own story and self-concept, which is frequently at odds with reality. Through Nick Carraway's narrative lens, the reader is provided with enough evidence to believe that Gatsby represents both an “extraordinary gift for hope” and the harsh post-war realities of out-of-control greed, moral corruption, and immigrant criminality that eventually led to economic collapse at the end of the Roaring Twenties. Because Fitzgerald's narrative excludes so much information about the mysterious millionaire, Nick's narrative bias in favor of Gatsby, or at least of his dream, can lead readers to believe in Nick's skewed perspective. Yet, not even Nick can completely ignore the duplicity of Gatsby's character, though the narrator utilizes his creative control over the story to divorce Gatsby himself from “what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams” (6). Thus, Nick locates the causes of the tragedy that he is about to relate outside of the control of his chief character, negating Gatsby's guilt with a few strokes of the pen: “Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction--Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (6). This confusion of the moral nature of Gatsby's character is established early on and continues to pose a problem for both the narrator and the reader for the remainder of the novel. At its core, *The Great Gatsby* is

concerned with a lack of clear signification for the individuals, which is representative of the breakdown of larger frameworks of meaning within the post-war America of Fitzgerald's work.

The dissolution of these established forms of society and one's place within it, particularly as men, combined with the unspeakable sights, sounds, and emotions connected to trench warfare waged with modern weaponry, left many soldiers unable to identify with the civilian world to which they returned. In the wake of the First World War, veterans were often left to rebuild their lives from the ground up, as physical and psychological trauma and poor economic conditions prevented men from reentering society as providers and citizens. Apart from the totalizing influence of militarization and mechanized warfare, many veterans attempted to tell their own stories, rather than accept the realities of war in their past--death, dismemberment, disappearance, a largely comfortless existence that could be ended in the blink of an eye. Often, their accounts of reality were shaped in terms that would enable them to attain release through fantastic self-fashioning that denied the grotesqueness and despair of war experience while retaining the excitement and risk of battle. As Daniel Pick illustrates there is a break between war and reality, between "blueprints and actual experience," that necessitates an escape to idealized versions of war experience, and this escape could be found through a similar shift in the veteran's self-concept, from the "systematic brutality" of the army soldier to a more palatable identity (45).

In order to regain a sense of adventure or possibly to lay claim to the heroic visions and types of an earlier age, removed by machinery that distanced combatants in warfare, a returning soldier might act out in a manner that defied reason and even morality, ignoring the most basic controls on human behavior in an effort to find release. This abandonment is exemplified by

Fitzgerald's portrayal of veterans in *The Great Gatsby* in the characters of Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby. While Nick's involvement with the affair between the married Daisy and Gatsby can be read as a search for release by proxy, Gatsby's own pursuit of a fantastic dream through the fabrication of an idealized self leads him to destruction through his association with criminal activity (7). Eventually paying the highest possible price for his dream, Gatsby's "Platonic conception of himself" is a myth that is built up around him before it crumbles under the weight of his self-deception. Through the construction of an elaborate lie based upon conspicuous consumption, mechanization, and conflict with Tom as a representative of the Old World of legitimacy, Gatsby seeks to regain the social mobility and status that Daisy represented for him before the war. In order to do so, he crafts himself as the picture of legitimate wealth, inherited from a fictional family of "some wealthy people in the middle-west--all dead now," and consequently denies his own involvement with the gangster Meyer Wolfsheim, which actually underlies his obscene wealth (69). Because of this duality, Gatsby is predisposed both to pour himself, his identity and his efforts, into an illusion and to seek confrontation with Tom through his illicit relationship with a woman who is, apart from Jay's vision of a pre-war world, off-limits to him. If Jay Gatsby embodies the American spirit of the 1920s, which clung to a dream of release through prosperity and self-fulfillment in the wake of incredible physical and psychological restraint, he also illustrates, in his confusion of symbolic meanings stemming from his mythicized personal past, the presence of a moral vacuum left in the wake of World War I.

The plight of the veteran that is at the heart of Gatsby's dangerous dream has garnered much critical attention, as it played an influential role in the literature of the post-war period. In his foundational study of the First World War and its impact upon the psyches of soldiers, Paul

Fussell explores the possible origins of this tendency to mythicize in order to avoid recollection of war experience. Fussell describes in detail the accounts of soldiers who had experienced the incredible and the incredibly grotesque, having lived in a kind of supernatural environment in which anything is possible, including the resurrection of the dead or the sudden and complete disappearance of the living. “A world of such ‘secrets,’ conversions, metamorphoses, and rebirths is a world of reinvigorated myth,” writes Fussell (115). This new mode of myth was the incongruous result of a mechanized field of battle and represents the disconnect between the miraculous and the harsh material realities of early twentieth-century warfare, which Fussell claims is “an anomaly worth considering” (115). I will show how Gatsby attempts to refashion himself through his personal narrative by way of a similar network of wondrous symbols, relating the violence of battle and his need for release through fantastical frameworks of meaning that move Gatsby’s actions outside of the realm of moral culpability. Eric J. Leed’s work, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, provides a similar exploration of various forms of ritualized experience that shaped soldiers’ perceptions of the world and their place in it. He examines the need of the soldier to relate his experience through language in order to forge a connection to the society to which he was expected to return. But equating war experience with a rite of passage was not sufficient to reintroduce the soldier into the civilian world, and thus identity was problematized. As I will demonstrate, this structuring of experience through frameworks of ritual and myth is clearly to be seen in Gatsby’s fantasy of personality and in his pursuit of Daisy, the “golden girl” with a “voice full of money” who represents an unattainable social ideal. Both Gatsby and Nick attempt to manipulate their own life stories in an effort to

participate in something greater than themselves, but the enormity of Gatsby's dream proves untranslatable and ultimately catastrophic.

In her study on the "New Death," Pearl James examines the impact of war experience on the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, focusing on the suppression and subsequent reoccurrence of violence in Nick Carraway's narrative, as it is told by a shell-shocked narrator. "The novel portrays what it is like to 'think *with*' a memory and identity shaped by war," James suggests (67). Through this lens, we might understand the tendencies of both veterans in *Gatsby* toward self-fabrication as a means of concealing wartime wounds through peace-time delusions. If, as James notes, "the context of war connotes trauma, which notoriously complicates psychological and narrative access to events and experience," we can locate the source for Nick's willful exclusion of war from his account of Gatsby's fabulous life in the narrator's own considerable trauma (67). While James's argument is thorough in its treatment of Nick Carraway, I will more fully explore the implications of trauma-induced reverie in the actions and character of Jay Gatsby. By tracing his use of fantastic self-conception to numb the pain of the war and to avoid the related guilt of combat and that of his seduction of Daisy Buchanan, I will show that Gatsby creates a new morality for himself, thus displacing culpability for his actions.

Michael Tratner's treatment of twentieth-century trends in economics is also insightful when considering the means by which Gatsby and other veterans sought out release in the civilian world. Through a careful examination of shifts in borrowing and spending during the 1920s, Tratner closely links Fitzgerald's representation of wealth to questions of morality and the new credit economy of the era. Another form of release that could separate the actions of an individual from the immediate consequences of those actions, borrowing on credit posed a

significant threat to the American people's moral stature. Wealth obtained without first saving (a form of restraint and self control) would enable mass consumption of goods previously only available to the rich, or as the result of an extended period of hard work. This new ease of social mobility provided a sense of release that blurred the lines between "carelessness and crime," an important distinction for several characters in the novel (74). I will employ Tratner's examination of economics as a form of release in my exploration of Gatsby's fantastical self-concept, as money gained through dubious means and spent in pursuit of his dream is both the means by which he seeks release and his undoing.

In order to better understand Gatsby's drive for release, a closer look at Leed's study is necessary. The novel's titular character is motivated by a desire to reclaim a time preceding the war, during which his romance with Daisy constituted a passage from anonymity to the promise of wealth and status. Thus, we might interpret Gatsby's actions as an attempt to repeat the rituals associated with that vision of the American dream of opportunity which was limited by the First World War and complicated for veterans in the war's aftermath. "Rites of initiation are designed to induct individuals into well defined social niches," Leed points out, but "war, certainly the First World War, did not do this. On the contrary, those who returned from the front . . . were convinced that they no longer had a social place to which they might return" (73). For this reason, veterans often struggled with acquiring a new place and a new way of looking at life, often attempting to tell their stories through a repetition of pre-war experiences in a form that denies the realities of wartime trauma: "In war, as in ritual, individuals learn not simply through the manipulation of language, but through their immersion in the dramatic structure of physical events. The experience of war, like the experience of initiation, is primarily a nonverbal,

concrete, multichannel learning experience that can never be reproduced in mere words” (74).

With this framework in place, we can better understand Gatsby’s need not only for a new outward persona, that of the self-made millionaire, but also for a new personal history. He gives this personal history life through the stories he tells about himself--having “sprung from his Platonic conception of himself,” Gatsby crafts a mythicized life apart from his true self in order to attain to the opportunities which were lost to him when the war began (104).

By forging a new selfhood, Gatsby separates himself from the experiences of war and, consequently, the blame for wartime violence. This remaking echoes an earlier transformation, from a poor urchin of the mid-west to a rajah of “all the capitals of Europe” and an inheritor of fortunes from a fictional parentage. This turn towards the fantastic is an intriguing permutation of the usual form of identity formation for veterans following World War One. According to Leed, the disjunction between pre- and post-war lives was largely a negative one, destructive rather than constructive:

It is significant that in combat men learned things that were not cumulative, things that did not enhance but devalued what they formerly thought they knew, things that made initial attitudes, truths, and assumptions into lies, illusions, and falsehoods. The character of the knowledge is reflected in the image of the veteran who is conventionally “cynical,” suspicious of general truths, resistant to the pressure of big words like “honor,” “glory,” “truth,” for his experience has taught him the sheer relativity of the things he once believed to be true.

. . . this knowledge is the product of a change that is irreversible, as

irreversible as the collapse of a familiar, beloved world, as irreversible as the spilling of blood. (75)

In Gatsby's illusion, a world has been lost and blood has been spilled, but rather than turning to cynicism, the veteran adapts by embracing a new world of enchanted objects and hope, choosing instead a fictional life lived as a "son of God," in service of "a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (Fitzgerald 104). This surprising shift is significant because, while it echoes the traditional veteran response to war, it is perhaps a greater illusion than that of the cynic. As Fitzgerald develops Gatsby's character throughout the novel, Gatsby's dream comes to constitute a dangerous drive for release that is not only "resistant to the pressure of big words like 'honor,' 'glory,' 'truth,'" but seeks to substitute an alternative set of values that are elevated above the restrictions of traditional morality.

Early in the novel, Nick lays the narrative groundwork for the building up of a morality for Gatsby that is beyond the concept of limit. In describing the object of his account, Nick praises Gatsby for his ability to see the world in terms of its unreality and to present a façade which conceals a broken soldier searching for release: "If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (6). Nick's phrasing points to the artificial and even mechanical nature of Gatsby's fabrication. To suggest that someone is defined by "an unbroken series of successful gestures" is to affirm his lack of substance and to indicate a dangerous flaw in that person, as this posturing faces the world with a mask, one so convincing as to fool even the wearer. Gatsby's willingness to believe in his own dream leads him to destruction. Following

Nick's suggestion that Gatsby is like a machine, it is possible to tie his character to the machine run amok, "the machine as agent of an open-ended process of destruction and disaggregation beyond the question of . . . limit" (Pick 49). Ironically, it is his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" that prevent him from realizing that Daisy is outside of his reach, and that, despite his wealth and the colossal power of his illusion, he cannot reclaim the past, as Nick points out. Having bought into the illusion of Jay Gatsby, James Gatz renders himself vulnerable to those things which are promised but are never to be. His indefatigable hope is the hope of a soldier who has lived trapped in a world limited to two encroaching walls of earth and a sky from which an impersonal shell might fall at any moment.

By opening up his reality to any possibility, possessing "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness," Gatsby negates the despair of trench warfare and machine gun fire, canisters of mustard gas and hand grenades (6). Ironically, then, Nick relates him to "one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away," hinting at the impact of mechanized warfare on veteran identity as well as at Gatsby's failure to anticipate the tragic outcome of his pursuit of release. Because he is distanced from reality by his dream, he cannot sense the danger that threatens, intent as he is upon an idyllic memory of the past and a desperate hope belonging to the future. Ultimately, Nick claims, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end," despite his trespasses, his corruption and his death, because the identity he had crafted for himself was larger than his life, the result of an inexhaustible belief that "the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (6, 105). In the final lines of Nick's opening chapter, we are given a moment of insight into Gatsby's fantasy world, as the narrator spies him "[stretching] out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way," towards his object of worship, "a single

green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (25, 26). He has wandered out onto his lawn “to determine what share was his of our local heavens,” a small detail that has significant implications for the reader’s understanding of Gatsby’s delusion. With this brief glimpse, Nick is let into the secretive world of Jay Gatsby, a soldier for whom the fantastic and the symbolic provide an avenue for the expression of immense desire apart from its consequences.

During the first party scene, Nick enters into Gatsby’s world of make-believe, a “theme park” populated by wanderers, Hollywood stars and uninhibited men and women searching for the chance to “indulge in wild fantasies for a few dollars” (Tratner 77); it is a mass of confusion, a “sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light” (Fitzgerald 45). Amid this perplexing menagerie of humanity, the impossible seems less remote, and “even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (Fitzgerald 72). When the narrator is finally introduced to his host, he does not recognize Gatsby, though they quickly determine that they have met before, during the war. Faced with a movement from the abstract and hazy environment of the party to the concrete facts of war, both men quickly drop the subject. However, Fitzgerald lets slip an important piece of information regarding Gatsby’s past--he, like Nick, had served as a machine gunner with the division that witnessed some of the most intense fighting that any soldier experienced at the front. This shared experience between the two men forms an important link that enables the veteran Gatsby to entrust his legacy, dream and reality, to another.

To all others apart from Nick, Gatsby remains mysterious and aloof, surrounded by wild rumors and defined by the opulence of his generosity. Gatsby’s guests come and go, like “moths

among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars,” enjoying his exotic liquors and dancing to the fashionable music of the day or gossiping about their host, all “with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission” (43, 45). They rarely meet Gatsby, but the guests serve to accomplish his purpose, consuming his wealth as sumptuously as he spends it in order that he might attract Daisy’s person and along with her his dream of an established position in society. This consumption can be understood as being closely tied to release, according to Michael Tratner, and not only for the swirling crowds of partygoers, but for Gatsby himself: “to win that voice ‘full of money’--Daisy’s--he simply spends, lavishly . . . Gatsby seduces Daisy not by spending on her, but simply by spending on everything and everyone. Gatsby’s parties represent the general willingness to spend money that is stimulated and created by the ‘promise of money’” (76). By facilitating consumption for others, he hopes to attract Daisy and consequently her legitimizing wealth, the promise of entry into the echelons of the likes of Tom Buchanan. Though the ultimate end of Gatsby’s wasteful disbursement of wealth is an illicit affair that is morally reprehensible, his outrageous spending is, from a Jazz Age perspective, “a moral good” (Tratner 75). Through the borrowing and spending of money, Tratner explains, Americans were “encouraged to release their desires,” and so it is with Gatsby, who is himself “the embodiment of immense desire” (76). By throwing his fabulous parties for any and all who will come, he seeks release by proxy in hopes of transferring his “illegitimate bonds,” quite literally the products of his criminal past in league with Wolfsheim, for the “legitimate bonds” of a romantic relationship with Daisy (74). This exchange, however, made on the credit of his ill-gotten millions, leaves Gatsby vulnerable to the same hunger for status which promises him release; eventually, he is himself consumed for the sake of preserving the place of the licit rich.

The mystery that surrounds Gatsby early on is replaced by a set of lies, told by Gatsby himself, that reveal the immensity of his self-delusion. “I don’t want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear,” he tells Nick (69). Gatsby draws upon a familiar religious framework to describe his own illusion: “‘I’ll tell you God’s truth.’ His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. ‘I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west--all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition’” (69). In Gatsby’s mind, “God” becomes “Jay Gatsby,” as the “truth” he pretends to tell is not the truth, but rather a lie that he has adopted to pursue release through Daisy and the pre-war past she has come to symbolize.

This past is highly class-inflected and idealized, placing emphasis upon the social mobility offered by the American dream of self-made personhood, denied him by his true, impoverished upbringing, as Nick later reveals. Gatsby’s drive for release from this penniless past is represented by his outlandish automobile and by the restlessness of his stance on its dashboard: “there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (68). His desire to be seen as one of the legitimately wealthy is taken to the extreme, as Gatsby ties himself not only to his vehicle, a mechanized and unpredictable entity that will eventually bring about the violence of Myrtle’s murder and, consequently, Gatsby’s death, but to the power of consumption to shape this false identity. As a mass-produced item often purchased on credit, the automobile was a symbol of status; but for Gatsby, who has borrowed both “money and his identity,” as Tratner points out, it is significant that his car is a custom job, and almost as absurd as Gatsby’s affected personality. Nick describes the car (later referred to as a “circus wagon” by Tom) as “bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with

triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns” (68). Like Gatsby himself, his car borders on the ridiculous in its aspirations to status, and this ludicrous appearance of wealth indicates the veteran’s striving after release through fantasy, consumption, and mechanization.

Having sworn to tell “God’s truth,” Gatsby continues to unveil the tapestry he has woven for himself, detailing the fictional excesses of his life preceding the trauma of war: “I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe--Paris, Venice, Rome--collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago” (70). Gatsby’s international exploits are ended by the entrance of the United States into European conflict in 1917, but his fantasy continues to cover over the horrors of war: “Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief and I tried very hard to die but I seemed to bear an enchanted life” (70). Gatsby wards off the realities of combat in order to build his illusion upon the foundation of heroism which an idealized account of war provides. His account not only denies his own culpability in war, including the massacre of “three German divisions among the piles of dead,” which he goes on to explain in detail to Nick, but allows him to substitute his pre-war romance with Daisy for the entire tragedy of war as “something very sad” that he is “trying to forget” (70). By way of this self-revelation, he strives after release from his actions during wartime while providing a validation for his pursuit of a married woman in the post-war world, penning his own story so that it justifies his breach of traditional moral behavior.

With the realization of his dream comes the destruction of Gatsby’s fictional self. After he and Daisy are reintroduced through Nick’s complicity in the affair, the enormous vitality of

Gatsby's illusion begins to break down. Faced with the flesh and blood realities of Daisy herself, the object of his fantastic desire, she cannot help but fall short of "what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (101). Because of his intense drive to find release from war through the adoption of an enchanted world facilitated by spending and machinery, language and hope, reality can never suffice for Gatsby: "It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way" (101). His investment of such immense imaginative power into Daisy's person, having once seen her as the "in-carnation" of his dream and the physical world, leaves Gatsby to lose in part the protection of his fictional narrative, his only defense against the memory and guilt of war. This loss is closely connected to the symbols that he once looked to as representative of Daisy herself: "'If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay,' said Gatsby. [. . .] Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. [. . .] Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" (98). As the mask begins to slip from Gatsby's dreamed-up selfhood, he rebels, insisting to Nick that the damage can be undone, if only Daisy were to erase her life with Tom through a verbal denial of the five years of war and dreaming which separated them: "'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'" (116). This refutation serves as an expression of Gatsby's release, holding in place his fantastic vision through a determination to reclaim the past; but this dream is eventually "broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice," after which point, "the long secret extravaganza was played out" (155).

In the final confrontation between the two men at the Plaza Hotel, Gatsby finds release in his verbal defense of the dream he has fostered for so long. As the proverbial dam of his restraint breaks, Gatsby confidently asserts his faith in the plans he and Daisy have made together: “‘I’ve got something to tell YOU, old sport,--’ . . . ‘Your wife doesn’t love you,’ said Gatsby. ‘She’s never loved you. She loves me.’” (137). In an explosive moment of self-revelation, he vehemently defends his and Daisy’s affair as he sees it: “Gatsby sprang to his feet, vivid with excitement. ‘She never loved you, do you hear?’ he cried. ‘She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!’” (137). But with this proclamation of the idyllic but impossible reality in which he has believed, building it up in his heart and borrowing on the promise of wealth, Daisy’s rejection of a past in which she did not love Tom crushes Gatsby. The final blow is struck when “God’s truth” about Gatsby, his entire notion of identity following the war, of status and wealth bought on credit and apart from the strictures of conscience, is revealed by Tom to be a sham and “a God Damned lie” (138). The legitimate bonds Gatsby had sought to establish through Daisy are severed, but he has still to pay the price of those illegitimate ones upon which he has built his dream.

The closing section of the novel begins Gatsby’s path to destruction, leading from the accident that ends Myrtle’s life to the discovery of Gatsby’s body as an “accidental burden” afloat in the pool he has not used all summer. A significant shift occurs in the interim to bring about the tragic violence that ends Gatsby’s life--for the first time in the novel, he claims responsibility for another’s actions, rather than denying his own culpability through fantastic self-conception. As he describes the scene of the murder for Nick, Gatsby reveals Daisy’s guilt in

Myrtle's death: "Well, I tried to swing the wheel--' He broke off, and suddenly I guessed at the truth. 'Was Daisy driving?' . . . 'Yes,' he said after a moment, 'but of course I'll say I was'" (151). Having extinguished the life of her husband's mistress without knowing it, Daisy is cleared of her own culpability through Gatsby's presence and by the last remnants of his dream, the belief that Daisy is somehow not entirely lost to him, should he choose to retreat once more into a lie. The significance of the proximity of technology to this deception must not be overlooked, as it takes the form of a kind of release by proxy. Gatsby's admission that, "Daisy stepped on it. I tried to make her stop, but she couldn't so I pulled on the emergency brake," closely relates violence and agency with mechanization, with the "death car" becoming an outlet for release almost of its own free will, apart from Gatsby or Daisy's ability or desire to control it. The result, then, of Gatsby's shift towards accepting guilt, though it is under false precepts, is another dangerous self-conception that brings an end to his dream and the fantastic life which he has imagined for himself. Once more, the forces of mechanization in the post-war world create restraint that must end in death.

If Gatsby's avoidance of moral culpability is closely related to release from memory of war and is accomplished through the fabrication of a new identity through consumption, mechanization, and conflict, I argue that Fitzgerald contrasts Gatsby with Tom Buchanan in his class-based search for release. As I will show in the following chapter, Tom's lack of war experience does not exclude him from a drive for release through violence. In his defense of an illusory identification as the traditional patriarchal figure, Tom employs mechanized means to overcome those who would challenge his position.

CHAPTER III

Tom Buchanan's Mechanized Manhood: Violence in Defense of the Old World

If Jay Gatsby embodies the post-war world that strives for release and is characterized by violence, Fitzgerald sets Tom Buchanan in opposition to the upstart playboy as a symbol of the pre-war world and its ideals for civilization. Tom is described in terms of his family's wealth, his sporting accomplishments, and his codified ideas concerning conventional constructions of family life, success, and the dominance of the white race. Tom's established wealth is challenged by Gatsby's bootleg dynasty, destabilizing Tom's view of society, in which "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" should, by rights, have no place in the world of East Egg's landed aristocracy and thus must be viewed as an invader.

Tom's fears mirror those of many in the first quarter of the twentieth century, as Fitzgerald hints in Tom's reading of a racist treatise "by this man Goddard," an homage to the popular work of Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, published in 1920. In the wake of the First World War, Stoddard argued, the white race had suffered incredible losses such that its supremacy was made vulnerable to the overthrow of those races who had stayed out of the war; already, the "tide of color" was rising and non-whites constituted a major presence in the American landscape due to twentieth-century trends in immigration. "The white world to-day lies debilitated and uncured," he claims, and as a result "the colored world views conditions which are a standing incitement to rash dreams and violent action" (16). Once endangered by its

own aggression and drive for domination, the white world continued to find itself on uneven footing in the post-war period. Within this context, James Gatz and Meyer Wolfsheim represent a challenge to Tom's Nordic racial superiority which must be met with violent retaliation for the sake of preserving his own status.

In doing so, Tom sees himself as "standing alone on the last barrier of civilization" (137) against modernity; yet, he fails to uphold the same values he claims to espouse, cheating on Daisy and struggling to suppress his desires to reclaim his past through violent competition with Gatsby. Because of the fragility of his hold on the old world and the status it affords him, Tom adopts the traits of the modern individual in a new world of total war, turning to a violence that is at once primitive and mechanical. In the novel's closing act, Tom's final revenge upon Gatsby echoes the experience of the soldier in World War I, for whom culpability in death often proved elusive because of the distancing effect of mechanized warfare. Through his attempts to control the new world of post-war realities, Tom seeks release through violence that is mechanized, consequently destroying his opponent through means that separate his actions from their consequences in order to maintain his own feeble masculine authority.

The question of what, exactly, constitutes male power has troubled not only Tom, but the whole of American manhood since the nation's beginning, and the answer has often been tied to economics. If Tom is intimidated at all by Gatsby, it is because of what Gatsby represents: a modern conception of masculinity that challenges the old order, rather than because of any physical threat posed by Jay. In his study *Manhood in America*, Michael S. Kimmel outlines the significant shifts in American masculine identity throughout the nation's history, tracing a change from the old-world figure of the Genteel Patriarch to the industrial Self-Made Man of the early

nineteenth century and beyond. This emphasis on the evolving nature of manhood is significant for *The Great Gatsby*, as Fitzgerald's novel occupies a space between two points of crisis, the First World War and the Great Depression of 1929, and it is at such points in history that Kimmel claims masculinity is shaped: "We tend to search for the timeless and eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work and the new definitions are yet to be firmly established" (3). Kimmel's work is highly informative for my consideration of Tom's character and the conflict he seeks with Gatsby, as his study draws upon a social and historical framework in order to flesh out the lived realities that underlie Fitzgerald's characters and setting. Like Kimmel, Alberto Lena's earlier study has taken up the topic of power structures connected to American masculinity in Fitzgerald's novel, focusing specifically on Tom Buchanan and the "deceitful traces of power" he embodies that are in fact, Lena claims, mere decadence and barbarism. He points to Nick's repeated description of Tom's inherited wealth and status that alienate him from the industrial age because he fails to produce anything through his own effort, instead "[living] on the fruits of the industrial community rather than within it" (23). Because he belongs to a leisure class that is plagued by an inability to move civilization forward, Lena suggests, Tom's character serves as "a symbol of social decay, and, in this light [his] aggressive manners, chicanery, and obsession with sport prove not only his personal degeneration, but also highlight his place as a handicap to the progress of society" (26). Moving forward from Lena's study, I will offer a shift in perspective that argues that Tom's exclusion from meaningful work through his class status leaves him restless and restrained from exercising his manhood in the form of contributions made to society. By the end of the novel, this restraint yields to a drive for release that places Tom Buchanan in violent opposition to Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald's Self-Made

Man. The latter ideal is not without its troubles, however, as the process of self-making unmoored American masculinity to produce a restlessness that would further complicate men's search for expression in the industrial age.

In order to better understand these terms and how they will guide my examination of Tom's character in this chapter, I will turn to Kimmel's *Manhood in America*. His study of American conceptions of masculinity is founded upon two key principles: first, that the definition of manhood has not remained static, but has been fluid and thus susceptible to shifts in social and psychological realities; and second, that, "beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century, the idea of testing and proving one's manhood became one of the defining experiences in American men's lives," thus locating a pivotal point in American history as a cultural nexus that holds significance for the changing American landscape in *The Great Gatsby* (Kimmel 1). With these principles in mind, Kimmel proceeds to trace the threads of America's quest for manhood back to our nation's roots. He identifies a choice between emulating the security of aristocracy that characterized the Old World and establishing a civic virtue in the New World based upon a rugged and industrious manliness, a choice that would shape our fledgling nation.

As we shall see, the comparison drawn by Fitzgerald between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby forms a parallel with Americans' perception of their national character in the years following the end of the Revolution and the declaration of the colonies' independence from Britain and her king. Apart from these formerly dominating, almost parental influences, the newly formed nation was forced to consider what it was to become in its independence. Kimmel identifies three main types of American masculinity that resulted from the need to define the nation. The first was the Genteel Patriarch, a Europeanized conception of a man who derived his

status from the security provided by his (often inherited) land ownership, whose refined manners and leisurely lifestyle served to indicate not only his high birth, but his commitment to honor and his virtuous character. This virtue was to be passed down to the patriarch's sons through his presence in the home, where he was to be deeply involved. But the influence of the Genteel Patriarch was also to extend out into the community, particularly in his service to the Christian church. For Kimmel, this first model is contrasted with that of the Heroic Artisan, whose self-reliance, hard work, and chastity imbued him with a healthy pride in his own accomplishments. Like the Genteel Patriarch, the Heroic Artisan was originally a European construction, but he stands for the better parts of the Old World which Americans held onto and claimed as their own, namely the industrious and independent man whose commitment to his community, his family and his nation were unquestioned. This unflinching devotion to higher ideals which were democratic in nature, rather than aristocratic, produced an American symbol that was idealized, but accessible. Both of these paragons of manhood would inform the final manifestation of American masculinity, though economic and political forces would prove highly formative, as well, in their practical claims upon it. As Kimmel points out, "The American man was now free to invent himself," having been released from his shackles by the new industrial free-market economy and separated at last from his British caretaker parents through America's declaration of independence from King George (15). In the absence of a sovereign and faced with a challenging world of competition in the marketplace, American men were forced to turn inward, toward the self, to become the completely self-reliant Self-Made Man. The fruits of a man's efforts in business became his standing in society; no longer did the refinement and upstanding citizenship of the Genteel Patriarch or the virtue and industry of the Heroic Artisan elevate one

man over another, as Old World standards for masculinity had proven to be ineffective in a new age of industry.

What resulted from this abandonment of traditional conceptions of manhood was a “new individual freedom [that] was as socially and psychologically unsettling as it was exciting and promising. To derive one’s identity, and especially one’s identity as a man, from marketplace successes was a risky proposition” (Kimmel 17). The lack of a firm foundation upon which men could stand, whether inherited status or personal convictions, undermined masculinity to the point of its becoming like quicksand. “The flip side” of the age of Self-Made Men was “anxiety, restlessness, loneliness,” Kimmel suggests, because “Manhood is no longer fixed in land or small-scale property ownership or dutiful service. Success must be earned and manhood must be proved--and proved constantly” (17). With little else to dictate morality and value, American men in the nineteenth century turned to hard work and the production of goods to manifest their masculinity and their virtue; but, just as the volatility of the goods they produced and the wealth they created could yield success or disaster, so could their sense of self be undone with a shift in the market. American manhood had freed itself from the bondage of tyranny only to become enslaved to the demands of an identity that was constantly fluctuating in the absence of the stabilizing forces of the Old World.

As the nineteenth century passed into the twentieth century, the Self-Made Man was still the dominant force in the workplace and in the society at large, but the drive for superiority had taken its toll upon the masculine spirit; with so much competition, identity was now more tenuous for men than ever before. Maintaining a sense of one’s selfhood in a swirl of brawling equals was a task that called for absolute power over the body and the mind in the absence of

larger forces working to direct individual lives. In other words, “The Self-Made Man was a control freak” (Kimmel 31). If a man could not control himself, he could not realize his potential in a hectic world of industrial production which demanded extensive expenditure of his vital energies. There remained to the American man but two options, according to Kimmel, “Stay and compete, or try to escape” (30). This pressure to perform while maintaining one’s sanity came at the cost, once more, of masculine freedom, effectively restraining the spirit of the American male to the point of flight from the responsibilities and realities of the home and the workplace. Escape could mean anything from alcoholism to abandoning home and family for the frontier; whatever form this escape took, the strains placed upon the body and soul of the American man ached to be relieved, often with disastrous results.

It is amid this chaos that we can locate Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, two characters who embody various aspects of the ideals outlined above, but who live and act in a post-war era characterized by a drive for release, for escape. Both men seek release from the strictures and forms of the Old World, as well as from the realities of industrialized society; however, their search for escape is complicated and exaggerated by the presence of the First World War. Both men are far from perfect examples of the ideals of manhood which they look to emblemize. Tom’s insistence upon protecting the statutes of “civilization,” of “family life and family institutions,” is problematized by his own search for release through luring various women to his bed, doubtless by merit of his inherited wealth and polo player’s build (Fitzgerald 122). The infidelities he revels in during his so-called “sprees” contradict his stated ideals of preserving the civilized world. Even the wealth that allows him his status is not his own and is turned to the use of release (Fitzgerald 10). Not only is his affluence inherited rather than earned, but his obscene

fortune is the result of the hard work and ingenuity of generations of Self-Made Men before him, and not the aristocracy of Europe; his ideals of gentrification and civility are borrowed, but not from his forebears.

Gatsby is similarly troublesome; his reputation as an ideal Self-Made Man is besmirched because of his association with Meyer Wolfsheim's bootlegging operation, among other "business gonnegtions" such as selling inflated bonds. However, this disconnect is placed in contradistinction to Tom because not even Jay is representative of a truly functional American manhood. Gatsby is ingenious, driven, and fabulously wealthy, but his drive becomes a dangerous obsession and his wealth has been ill-gotten in connection with immigrant gangsters who represent the forces challenging nativist American manhood, a fact that Tom utilizes to attack Gatsby as a villain and a fraud, thus winning Daisy back to Tom's side. Gatsby's independence is an illusion, as well, as he is rendered incapable of obtaining his prize through conventional means, instead relying upon Daisy's approval and upon Nick in his role as intermediary in the affair.

Likewise, Tom struggles to maintain that which his masculine type should guarantee, as his actions lack honor or refinement which would mark him as a leader or role model and his presence in the home is not only distant but neglectful and even threatening, a stark contrast to the "Christian gentleman [. . . who embodies] love, kindness, duty, and compassion" (Kimmel 13). His duty is to himself alone, and his outer appearances of manhood, his family and his marriage, are a sham. Tom feels entitled to a certain lifestyle, however, which includes both the privilege of Daisy's upbringing and position in society and the ability to cheat on her repeatedly as he pleases, but does not accept the possibility of Daisy's infidelity with Gatsby. Ultimately,

both Tom and Gatsby become symbols not for the traditional forms of American masculinity that Michael Kimmel describes, but rather for Fitzgerald's portrayal of the dysfunctional state of modern manhood.

Despite his inherited wealth and position, Tom's search for release indicates that he is unfulfilled by the lifestyle of the Genteel Patriarch. As readers, we feel Tom's lack throughout Fitzgerald's text, particularly in Nick's observations of Tom's movements and mannerisms. "Restless" in all of its permutations is a frequent descriptor for him, coming to characterize his actions alongside his brutality and physical strength. Both his physicality and his restlessness betray Tom's sense of not belonging, of living a lie. During Nick's visit to the Buchanan estate in the novel's opening act, he describes his impressions of Tom: "I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game. . . . [He was] always leaning aggressively forward" (10, 11). Because he cannot rest in his established position built upon the foundations laid by others, the Self-Made Men of his ancestry, Tom is caught up in a desire to reclaim the past, to intimidate others into acceding to the authority that would have belonged to the Genteel Patriarch of a previous age, through the force of his bodily presence and his domineering voice, with "a touch of paternal contempt in it," rather than through any of the personal virtues which would have defined the earlier figure: "Now don't think my opinion on these matters is final,' he seemed to say, 'just because I'm stronger and more of a man than you are'" (11). In grasping for this power based upon his brute force, Tom stakes his identity as a man on the uncertain grounds of an outdated ideal. Because he has become a part of the new world of post-war mechanized violence, as I will demonstrate, he cannot attain to an Old World form of gentility. Rather than fulfilling his duties to his family or

cultivating in himself a commitment to virtue, he seeks to establish his position by merit of eliminating those who would challenge it.

Because Tom lacks the virtues inherent in the masculine type which he seeks to emulate, his money becomes another means by which he seeks to obtain the external trappings of gentility, including his home and even Daisy. Tom did not inherit the Buchanan estate, a “cheerful red and white Georgian Colonial mansion” reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British monarchs, he rather purchased it from “Demaine the oil man,” a self-made tycoon of business not entirely unlike Gatsby (10). Again, Tom’s demeanor indicates his tenuous hold on his own sense of manhood: “‘I’ve got a nice place here,’ he said, his eyes flashing about restlessly” (10). The mansion represents both the Old World style and the success of the American industrialists of the late nineteenth century, and Tom is discontented with both as neither can imbue the four walls with a stable masculine identity for him. In fact, Nick’s narration gives the impression that Tom’s time is largely spent away from the home, apparently preferring his mistress over his wife and the hustle and bustle of New York over the tranquility promised by domestic life. If material possessions serve to reassure Tom of his place in society, then we can understand his acquisition of Daisy Fay as being no different. We are told that on the day before their wedding Tom gave Daisy “a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars,” a small fortune, but a relatively insignificant price tag to place upon a woman who would help Tom fit the part of the patriarchal family man. For Tom, then, as for Gatsby, manhood is a matter of purchasing power; an economy of masculinity governs each character’s relationship to his self-fashioning as a man.

In the absence of a sure footing for the two men's masculine self-concepts, we can observe in Jay and Tom the presence of an intense restraint which demands release through the discovery of a firm foundation for manhood. For centuries, men had gone to war in defense of something larger than themselves, their nation and their families, and their way of life; these men had derived a sense of purpose and masculine self-worth through combat, even at the cost of their lives. With the advances in technology that had come about as a result of the industrial age, however, the formation of a masculine identity in war was problematized by mechanized warfare. In the presence of machine guns, long-range artillery, and poisonous gas, soldiers were either alienated from their sense of agency in battle or traumatized by it. No longer could poetry be written to glorify an army's valiant charge and heroic victory through the strength of individuals, because the enemy was now capable of mowing down a battalion with a handful of soldiers armed with modern weaponry, and the fields had been replaced by a muddy No Man's Land strewn with barbed wire. This is the world in which Tom and Jay are left to determine their own strength as men. While Gatsby has experienced the disillusioning restraint of trench warfare and mechanized massacre firsthand at the front, Tom has never known battle. As I will demonstrate, however, Tom has nevertheless come to exhibit a violence that is symptomatic of release sought by soldiers who had been involved in mechanized warfare as a means of maintaining his own identity. I will trace the development of Tom's character, from a brimming potential for brutality to the eventual manifestation of mechanized violence, which allows him to maintain his own status.

Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald crafts Tom Buchanan to be defined by his instability. His sense of selfhood is volatile, and consequently restrained by the insecurities of his class in

the wake of war. Early in the narrative, Nick recognizes Tom as a highly physical individual whose every word and movement “added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed,” hinting strongly at his need for release (Fitzgerald 11). This drive is concealed by the trappings of civility that surround Tom: his palatial estate, riding clothes and expansive lawn (described by Nick in terms reminiscent of a No Man’s Land)¹; yet, Nick cannot help noticing that there is a pent-up forcefulness in him that resembles a powerful machine in neutral: Tom is “sturdy,” with a “hard mouth” and two “shining, arrogant eyes” resembling headlights; his muscles can be seen “shifting” beneath his clothes and his body is “capable of enormous *leverage*--a cruel body” (11, emphasis mine). Even while idling, he can easily be seen as a threat in the form of a mechanized monster, complete with a gear shift barely held in place by the chassis of a former age.

Outside of West Egg, however, the signifiers that hold Tom’s masculine identity in place melt away in the heat and energy of New York. Unlike the ordered substance of the Buchanan estate, the city apartment is a confusion of conversations and faces, a carnival complete with Myrtle in “costume” and her sister Catherine in a clownish pasquinade of Hollywood style, “a complexion powdered milky white” and “eyebrows . . . plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle” (34). The raucous party that Nick describes is composed of the social hopeful, for whom the wild promise of the big city is an escape from the stratified class system to which Tom believes himself to belong. Myrtle, in particular, operates under illusions of classist superiority and an “impressive hauteur,” becoming in her presumptuousness a symbol for the threat of the *nouveau riche*. Like Nick’s initial reaction to Tom’s appearance and manner in the first chapter, Myrtle is also described in terms of a machine, transforming amid the chaos of

¹ Pearl James suggests that Nick’s observations are shaped by his war experience, “[surfacing] sometimes through visual symbolization,” such as the Buchanan lawn (*The New Death*, 83).

the party: “Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air” (35). This vision of Myrtle’s connectedness with the post-war world of machines anticipates her confrontation with Tom and the first major instance of violent release in the novel. Apart from Daisy and his West Egg villa, Tom is at last able to shift into gear, free from the governing presence of Old World ideals. Yet, it is in this state that Tom reacts with a mechanical violence in defense of his own genteel status: “Tom Buchanan and Mrs. Wilson stood face to face discussing in impassioned voices whether Mrs. Wilson had any right to mention Daisy’s name. . . . ‘Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!’ shouted Mrs. Wilson. ‘I’ll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai--?’ . . . Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand” (41). Tom’s assault is cold, cruel, calculated, and efficient--his movement is a “short deft” one, an automatic response to conflict that represents a break with his genteel illusion.

Having experienced release apart from the signifiers of his wealth and status, Tom returns to Long Island shifted into high gear and tuned up for his confrontation with Gatsby at the Plaza Hotel. This final conflict serves to usher in the closing sequence of the novel, and is the ultimate proving ground for Tom’s classist superiority over Jay. The careful reader, however, will notice that this chain of events is not only concerned with pre-modern, aristocratic forms of status and identity, but also with the impact of the modern world upon those older forms, as this section is bookended by the presence of machines. Tom utilizes technology both to preserve his own status through mechanical violence enacted against Myrtle and to attack the legitimacy of his rival’s wealth by comparing himself to Jay based upon the vehicles they own and operate, once again

drawing the reader's attention to the presence of machinery, this time in the form of automobiles. While Tom drives a more traditional coupé, he refers to Gatsby's garishly opulent auto as a "circus wagon," undermining the success it represents by framing it purely as a symbol of the *nouveau riche* who lack the refinement of the former aristocracy. To further diminish Jay's power, Tom insists that they switch cars, simultaneously robbing Gatsby of his control and allowing Tom to command the authority of the new mechanized world which the car represents. As the two groups race into the city, however, Tom still fears the freedom provided to Daisy and Gatsby by the open road: "Several times he turned his head and looked back for their car, and if the traffic delayed them he slowed up until they came into sight. I think he was afraid they would dart down a side street and out of his life forever" (132). Confronted by the threat of technology and yet empowered by it, Tom seeks to defend his own claims to legitimacy by revealing Gatsby's fraud.

In the scene that unfolds, Tom seeks release through competition with Gatsby, though this contest is not won through mechanized means or violence, but rather by appeals made to status based upon the illusions of gentility and racial superiority which Tom fosters. He paints Jay as an upstart "sneering at family life and family institutions," the harbinger of a racial degradation which will "throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (137). Tom compares himself to Gatsby, decrying the disorder of "the modern world," while standing with his own feet planted firmly on "the last barrier of civilization;" as Jay and Tom struggle to hold onto their fantasies of control over a changing world, both seek release through conflict aimed at breaking the other's illusion. Gatsby's claims that Daisy has never loved Tom constitute an attack on his status, as she serves as a symbol of Tom's gentility; once more, he replies with

the force of a machine: “‘You must be crazy!’ exclaimed Tom *automatically*” (137, emphasis mine). Both man and mechanism, Tom further alienates Gatsby by exposing his criminal connection with the immigrant gangster Wolfsheim. This revelation is the final blow that crushes the life out of Gatsby’s indefatigable dream: “with every word [Daisy] was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away” (142). With his victory over Gatsby, Tom begins his retreat into the safety and distance provided by his wealth and status, now secure from the threat of Jay’s phantom millions.

In the post-war world, however, Tom cannot fully escape the violence of mechanized warfare by clinging to pre-war ideals. Following the showdown at the Plaza, Nick hints at what is to come, linking the automobile to a potential for violence: “So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight” (143). With Daisy at the wheel, the “death car” extinguishes Myrtle’s “tremendous vitality,” simultaneously ending Tom’s infidelity by removing an object of his release and incriminating Gatsby through his willingness to preserve Daisy’s innocence by taking blame. The violence of the accident triggers Tom’s drive for revenge, now governed by a fusion of pre- and post-war worlds which requires that his release must be accomplished in part through mechanized means.

Like the entrenched soldier who launches a mortar round into an invisible enemy force, Tom uses technology to obtain release by proxy, forcing Wilson, a mechanic closely tied to and identified with automobiles, to act in his stead. Fitzgerald clearly paints Wilson as a weak figure, a failed Heroic Artisan in Kimmel’s terms, someone who is “run down,” “spiritless,” and “anaemic” (129, 29). His life is not his own, but rather dominated by others, and because of this lack of drive he is easily controlled, not unlike the vehicles he buys and sells. This likeness is

exemplified by the “dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner” of Wilson’s “unprosperous and bare” garage (29). Through his forcefulness, his brute strength and his superior social status, Tom is successful in “programming” Wilson to exact a final revenge upon Gatsby. “Picking up Wilson like a doll,” Tom convinces the husk of a man of his own innocence in the affair, eventually shifting blame onto Jay, as Tom later reveals to Nick.

The face of American masculinity was irrevocably changed by the events of the first half of the twentieth century, and Fitzgerald’s rendering of the struggle between the pre-war and post-war Americas finds significant expression in the characters of Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan. Each man finds himself unable to reconcile his own drives with the ideals of the established past and consequently strives after release through conflict with the ideological other. While Tom demonstrates a form of release that turns to mechanized violence in defense of his own self-conceptualization, based upon an antiquated view of civilization, I will argue in the following chapter that machines, and particularly automobiles, are closely tied to each of the major characters in Fitzgerald’s novel, and that cars serve to unify them in their representation of the post-war drive for release and mechanized violence.

CHAPTER IV

“It Takes Two to Make an Accident”: The Problem of Agency and Automobility as Conduit for Release

As we have seen, *The Great Gatsby* is shaped by the confluence in the post-World War One world of technology and humanity. Whether in Tom’s defense of the Old World through his manipulation of Wilson, a man closely tied to machines, or in Gatsby’s personal identification with his absurd and gaudy custom automobile, Fitzgerald presents a mechanized post-war world in which machines, and particularly cars, serve as important symbols for identity and agency. Throughout *Gatsby*, these symbols provide a narrative structure for the novel while complicating several major themes that reoccur frequently in the text. By coming to represent larger motifs concerning the role of individual agency, the impact of wartime violence upon the modern psyche, and trends in economic and social realities during the early twentieth century, cars both aid in the reader’s understanding of Fitzgerald’s milieu and provide paradoxes between the vehicles’ surface symbolic meaning and their greater implications in the modern world.

Each set of characters in the novel relates to this new form of technology in a different way, and each response to automobility is tied into the pursuit of release, whether he or she intends it or not. For veterans such as Gatsby and Nick, the presence of automobiles throughout the novel harkens back to their experiences with mechanized warfare, and consequently, to the trauma and death that still torture the men in peacetime, quite literally driving them to pursue

release from the memory of war. Tom Buchanan sees automobility as part of modernity, the larger threat to the established pre-war order of society, to civilization itself. He complains of the freedom that belongs to twentieth-century women such as Jordan Baker in which the automobile no doubt played a significant role and views the absurd car, from which Gatsby derives a sense of status and social mobility, as an affront to tradition and to respectability; yet, Tom ultimately eliminates his rival in the wake of the accident that kills Myrtle, turning the violence of mechanization to his own purposes. For Daisy, cars are both symbols of status and mobility, but, unlike the men in the novel, she does not directly relate this form of machinery to violence or to a drive to impress or dominate. Rather, she recalls the pre-war innocence of her youth and her “white girlhood” spent courting (and, likely, making love to) young officers in a “little white roadster” (24, 79). Ironically, then, she is the only character whose piloting of an automobile results in death. This unexpected fact points back to the contemporary concern over the responsibility of driving and who (women, immigrants, and other minorities) should not be allowed to do so. While the relationship between the individuals, whoever they may be, and their motor vehicles are supposed to be a matter of human control over machinery, there are instances of release in the novel that are directly connected to the unpredictability of runaway technology and the loss of agency which automobiles have come to represent in the post-war world. In fact, the seemingly random or ironic events tied to cars in the novel might be understood as being due to the willful acts of another powerful, but misunderstood, set of characters: the machines themselves. Having stolen some of the agency of their human counterparts, cars are capable of semi-human actions, such as denial of the past and even murder--the humanoid attributes, ironically, of a violent, mechanized generation following the First World War.

Cars not only become veritable characters in *The Great Gatsby*, but they also suggest the broader difficulty of laying blame on any one nation or individual for the catastrophic events of the war, which would go on to claim millions of lives through new forms of mechanized violence. This difficulty flowed from the systematizing of war, a process similar to that of the systematization of labor in the nineteenth century. As Daniel Pick points out in the writings of Marx and Engels, “the machine is not a tool manipulated by the worker but vice versa. The process is ‘set in motion by an automaton, a motive power that moves itself’” (53). Thus, the agency of individuals was subsumed under a larger framework of controlling entities. Within the text, automobiles are tools which represent forces of mechanical power and violence which are reminiscent of the ravages of war upon human bodies; automobiles are similar to the weapons used in combat, such as the impersonal mortar round lobbed thousands of feet from trench to trench to effect indiscriminate violence, or to the tools used in factories, because they are means by which human responsibility is displaced. It is through this displacement that characters like Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby are unable to account for or are distanced from the deaths in the novel, much less to feel truly responsible for them. Without the possibility of determining guilt or innocence, morality is skewed in such a way as to become instinctual, rather than logical. As Pearl James points out, “Modernity, repeatedly embodied by the automobile, seems to privilege the primitive. The advent of machine culture is pictured as upsetting the fragile balance humans had struck between their destructive and rational capacities” (105). If the logic of machinery were to replace the human sense of moral responsibility that otherwise produces accountability for human actions, violence would topple conscience. During the war, this accountability was, in fact, “mystified,” and so, “individuals and nations--consciously or not--refused to represent the

war as something they had created and willingly perpetuated” (James 104). In the same way, the violence of the novel, manifesting itself in various automobile “accidents” (a significant term suggesting a negation of culpability), is a kind of self-defense, rather than a show of aggression. “Compelled to act” by war trauma and other forces outside of themselves, James asserts, Fitzgerald’s characters unknowingly find an expression of release in their use of automobiles (104). Through a careful examination of the ways in which each of the main characters in *The Great Gatsby* relates to the concept of automobility and, through automobility, finds release while swerving away from their own culpability, I will demonstrate the progression of Fitzgerald’s treatment of mechanized violence and blame for war throughout the novel.

Technology’s ability to shape history is perhaps nowhere as readily apparent as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and much has been written exploring the impacts of the automobile, both social and conceptual, upon culture. Some writers have focused their critical lenses upon the impact of machines and technology more generally in the lives of early twentieth-century individuals in America and abroad. Cecelia Tichi, for instance, in her work *Shifting Gears*, describes the forces at work in the popular imagination of the late industrial age and explores concepts like instability, efficiency, and waste. Each of these terms is significant to understanding the control that automobiles were believed to give to the early modern driver, who lived in a world defined by social flux: “this anxiety about a global state of instability [fostered] an intense appreciation for the power of technology” (42). Instability, in particular, pertains to the act of driving, because the car is a machine that gives control, or promises to do so. The automobile was an extension of one’s self by which agency is complicated and extended beyond the power of the individual; but it is exactly this force outside of oneself that is prone to

unpredictability--Tichi examines the “chaotic energies [that] exceed all human efforts at order or discipline,” once present in natural disasters but observable also in the industrial world (45).

Tichi’s study is highly valuable in my examination of both automobility and release, connecting technology to expressions of energy which lead to death in *Gatsby*. Offering a more specific sociological treatment of automobility, Deborah Clarke’s work focuses primarily upon the cultural impact of driving for women and minorities. Through an examination of various cultural artifacts of the early twentieth century, she demonstrates how cars offered considerable freedom to women. Cars enabled them to break through into the traditionally male-dominated realm of automobility in order to find release through the exercise of social and sexual mobility outside of the home and apart from masculine control. This study will serve in part to inform my inspection of Daisy and Jordan with respect to their automobility; though Clarke’s work is not specifically geared towards an understanding of war, it can provide insight into factors concerning women drivers, and the fears they caused, in Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age world.

With a broader critical background in place, it is now possible to shift gears and follow two roads down which *The Great Gatsby* pursues the themes of release and denial in connection with automobiles as characters. First, we must examine Fitzgerald’s drivers. The ways in which each individual relates to automobility, the power it offers and the opportunity for the repression of personal culpability for past events which it represents, hold significant meaning for our understanding of the novel’s treatment of driving in connection to larger themes in the text.

Perhaps the character most closely connected to automobility is Jordan Baker, as she strives to define herself apart from Daisy Buchanan through the release that she derives from her driving. Though she is not guilty of vehicular homicide, as Daisy appears to be by novel’s end,

nor does she directly draw upon her car in the formation of her identity, as Gatsby does, Jordan is clearly just as important to Fitzgerald's depiction of automobility because she seeks the danger and romance which she believes Daisy to have in her affair with Jay. Deborah Clarke's study of automobile culture in twentieth-century America offers some insight into the author's crafting of Jordan's character. In a kaleidoscopic examination of shifts in culture that resulted from the widespread availability and adoption of automobiles, Clarke traces the relationship between cars and femininity, from the threat posed to established patriarchy by independent women like Jordan to the escape offered to both men and women by the open road in the second half of the century. Clarke illustrates the power of automobility in American culture in general, and its implications for American women, in particular. While Jordan is a powerful example (alongside Daisy) of the modern fear of woman drivers, she is also Fitzgerald's main mouthpiece for the motif of carelessness, as her careless driving represents the threat of technology to human agency. Interestingly, as Clarke points out, Jordan's name is suggestive of two separate brands of cars marketed specifically to women, "the Jordan Playboy and the Baker Electric," and thus she comes to embody the threat of female drivers to traditional forms of masculinity. These were closely tied to automotive identity in that the car offered an escape from male control and from the home. Thus, the ready availability of cars which enabled this perceived imbalance in gender relations was recognized by many modern writers, including Fitzgerald, as "a deadly combination" (Clarke 57). Tom Buchanan, the defender of civilization that he is, quickly latches on to the dangers of Jordan's automobility, decrying the manner in which she is allowed to "run around the country this way" (Fitzgerald 23).

Tom's judgment of Jordan's mechanically produced independence is later echoed by Nick when she narrowly avoids hitting a pedestrian with her car: "she passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man's coat. 'You're a rotten driver,' I protested. 'Either you ought to be more careful or you oughtn't to drive at all'" (63). The narrator's experience with mechanized violence and the trauma it produces makes him alert to the near miss, prompting him to question her culpability in driving so recklessly. "'I am careful,'" Jordan replies, "' . . . well, other people are. . . . They'll keep out of my way,' she insisted. 'It takes two to make an accident'" (63). Here Fitzgerald taps into the post-war anxiety over who was, after all, to blame for the outbreak of war. If nations could be seen as "careless" drivers, piloting the progress-driven machine of the industrial age through a minefield of social and political turmoil at the end of the nineteenth century, the conflict sparked in the summer of 1914 would merely be an "accident" without a perpetrator, but one claiming millions of victims all the same. Nick's reply, then, sums up the situation leading to the First World War: "'Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself'" (63). Was it merely the case that the collision of world forces, unforeseen and unpremeditated, had resulted in years of devastation? Fitzgerald's use of the act of driving as metaphor might suggest just such an answer.

Jordan's driving similarly serves to hide the fact of her own guilt and tendency towards release through maintaining the upper hand by cheating; further, this cheating, in sports and in life, provides her release through competition with Daisy, the unwitting rival against whom she sets herself in regards to her femininity, her status, and her pursuit of romance. From the first chapter on, Fitzgerald sets up Jordan Baker as a foil of sorts to Daisy Fay, even after she becomes Daisy Buchanan. The initial scene in which both women are reclining before dinner

illustrates the contrast between them--though they are both dressed in white, their characters could not be more different. While Jordan lies “completely motionless” until she mechanically stands with “short, deft” movements, and remains largely silent (Nick is surprised when she speaks), Daisy’s voice is alive with the promise of “gay, exciting things,” despite being “paralyzed with happiness” (13-15). While Daisy’s sensual feminine voice and energy capture Nick’s attention, so does Jordan’s “erect carriage . . . like a young cadet” (15); the latter is described in masculine terms (and in automotive terms, *a la* “carriage,” suggesting the chassis of a car or the cabin of a train) while the former is the stereotypically graceful Hollywood flower. These differences, as the careful reader might discern from Jordan’s story of her first encounter with Gatsby in Louisville, in part drive her to envy Daisy and her flings in an automobile: “she was just eighteen, two years older than me, and by far the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville. She dressed in white and had a little white roadster and all day long the telephone rang in her house” (79). Beginning with that day in their “beautiful white girlhood” together, Jordan seeks to eliminate her disadvantages of class, age, and femininity through her reckless living and careless driving (16). In her multiple affairs with men, Nick included, she emulates Daisy’s car-enabled romances; through her fame as a sportswoman and her frequent visits to Gatsby’s parties where the masses gather to partake in the lifestyles of the wealthy, she escapes from the restraints of her lower social standing; through her automobility, she sets herself apart from Daisy until the fateful crash which eventually results in Gatsby’s murder, and consequently, the end of Daisy’s affair; thus, Jordan is elevated above her rival through mechanical violence. It is in Daisy, then, that she finds another careless driver; but, because of her familiarity with the

act of driving, and even, ironically, wreck-less driving, Jordan again gains the advantage over her competitor through automobility.

Within the framework of her rivalry with Daisy, Jordan Baker can also be seen as a modern woman accustomed to burying the past and avoiding blame for her actions through manipulating the rules of engagement for her own benefit: “She was incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage, and given this unwillingness I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool insolent smile turned to the world” (63). Through “subterfuges,” she finds release in always getting her own way, in never having to “endure being at a disadvantage,” particularly to Daisy. This dishonesty is displayed through her relationship with Nick, which is defined by superficiality and casualness, eventually ending in an equally casual manner in the wake of Gatsby’s death. Following the funeral, Nick discovers that Jordan has quickly seduced a new lover, that she is engaged to him and blames Nick for “[throwing her] over,” claiming that he is “another bad driver” (186). Rather than take responsibility for her own taciturn nature, she lies in order to frame Nick as in league with Gatsby, thus negating her affair with Nick by changing the rules of the relationship--she cannot abide careless people, and so, by shifting her perspective, she is no longer at a loss to him or to her female rival, as she has replaced Nick and even possibly secured her position in society through her engagement. Like Daisy’s and Tom’s, her carelessness, represented by her driving and by her tendency toward deception and unsportsmanlike trickery, defines Jordan as the product of a machine age in which responsibility is displaced by the freedom offered by automotive technology.

While Jordan might be seen as the embodiment of careless female driving, Tom Buchanan serves as Fitzgerald's example of another end of the same spectrum, the reckless male driver seeking sexual release outside of the home. Unlike Gatsby and Nick, who seek release from the trauma of war experience, which I will explore later, Tom's automobility is an outlet for release from the traditional expectations and restrictions of his social status and trappings of gentility. As I have shown in chapter three, however, Tom takes on the attributes of an automobile, indicating the duality of his character in relationship to modern technology. This interchangeability of characters, cars for people, seems to support the interpretation of automobiles as actors in *The Great Gatsby*. Through his connection with cars, Tom illustrates both the sexual drive that found expression in both male and female driving, and the acquisition of mechanical aspects into modern humanity. At several junctions, Tom is described as being intimately in touch with the mechanism of a car. In his tailing of Gatsby's car to the Plaza Hotel, he "[pushes] the unfamiliar gears tentatively," but by the time his confrontation with Gatsby is in view, he has gained a mastery over the vehicle, "[throwing] on both brakes impatiently" to draw up in front of Wilson's gas pumps for fuel (128, 129). In his pursuit of vengeance upon Gatsby, the end of which is the simultaneous restoration of dominion over the Buchanan household and the subsequent vehicular slaughter of his mistress, he takes on the power of the mechanized world, a power which both gives control and challenges it.

In explaining Gatsby and Daisy's romance to Nick, Jordan reveals the affairs that automobility makes possible for Tom: "A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers too because her arm was broken--she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa

Barbara Hotel” (82). In addition to his more recent affair with Myrtle (intriguing, as well, on account of her husband’s connection to cars), Fitzgerald charts a trend of release through wild flings in automobiles, which later form an ironic parallel with Myrtle’s murder. During the Plaza scene, Tom frames these indiscretions as “spree[s],” almost as if he cannot control himself, throwing off responsibility by claiming that a kind of machine-like speed or force propels him. When Daisy adds to his list of infidelities, “do you know why we left Chicago?” (139), it becomes clear that technology and release are closely connected. Finally, as discussed in chapter two, Tom’s carelessness is exhibited in his use of mechanized means to exact revenge upon Gatsby, his rival for both status and the sexual aspects of Daisy’s being. Through his forceful manipulation of George Wilson, a seemingly mechanical man in his own right, Tom disassociates himself from the results of his malice, the deaths of Gatsby and Wilson, thereby negating or at least complicating his own culpability in the “holocaust” which Nick describes.

Daisy’s culpability in the novel is perhaps the most complex. Early in the novel, we are given a picture of her release through automobility--she is defined in Jordan’s recollection by her white dress and by her “little white roadster” (24). While both are perhaps intended to indicate her virginal purity as a southern belle, Daisy’s popularity with the young officers of Camp Taylor suggests a secondary use for the latter object. Her car offers her a mode of escape from the world of upper-class sensibilities by which she might have found opportunity for romantic (read, sexual) escapades, including her sexual encounter with the young officer Jay Gatsby. This promiscuity forms a significant outlet for release which seems to undermine the significance of her romances. She fails to commit herself fully to any one man, and thus Tom’s wealth trumps her engagement to the penniless Gatsby. Though she despises Tom for his infidelity, she returns

to him because she, like him, is defined by carelessness. In the closing chapter of the novel, Nick points out the couple's unity in purpose, despite all that has happened. As if under the influence of the same kind of "programming" which allows Tom to turn Wilson to his own destructive purposes, Daisy is pulled back into the nebulous void of a world in which blame is impossible and all acts are equally accounted for by one's desire to deny the past. Nick rejects Tom for exactly this abandonment of responsibility:

I couldn't forgive him or like him but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy--they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.... (188).

Inherent in this description is a violence which Daisy hardly seems capable of. While Tom, a hulking, menacing brute of a polo player, might easily be seen to commit an act of murder, Daisy should be, as her name suggests, frail and innocent. Yet, through the act of driving, she is made highly suspect. Her body is weak and lily-white, but, behind the wheel of a car, her actions bring about death, and the question of Daisy's intent must be answered. Could she have known about Myrtle's love affair with her husband, making the "accident" an act of revenge, or is Daisy's personal purity intact, but threatened by the chaotic potential of the automotive power beneath her feet?

Or, perhaps Daisy's running down Myrtle in the "death car" is the delayed response of a betrayed lover. As Pearl James suggests, "Trauma's first symptom is forgetfulness and denial, or even relief. Other effects of the accident appear later, after an appearance of having escaped

unharméd” (89). This framework might serve to explain the after-effects of the period following her collision with Myrtle in Gatsby’s car. During this period, Daisy apparently quickly forgets the incident, along with her extended affair with Jay and Tom’s repeated marital unfaithfulness. In addition, James’s treatment of trauma could account for a source of release for Daisy. The previous emotional scarring of Tom’s first affair, soon after his marriage to Daisy, might be understood as a possible trigger for the violence through which her rival for Tom’s affection is killed. Because she is acting upon an impulse flowing from a past traumatic event, her forgetfulness and consequent return to a “normal” lifestyle with her child and cheating husband are perfectly logical courses of action. Though she has never experienced war, Daisy is impacted by the trauma which has become inherent in the post-war world of release, and this release is attained through the use of mechanized violence.

In her thorough work on the impact of trauma upon veterans in *Gatsby*, Pearl James unpacks the mechanized violence as it is revealed in the novel’s automobile accidents, where, she claims, “they resonate across the text as a series of events that are simultaneously connected (and therefore predictable) and abruptly unexpected,” and “this paradoxical quality of meaningful randomness constitutes an element of modernism in the aesthetic organization of Fitzgerald’s plot” (89). But these accidents serve as not only a structural element, but as a source of trauma that creates a disjointed perception of events and time that separate the fact of each wreck from its immediate consequences, thus complicating agency. Within this framework, James argues for the novel as a narrative of war in which each accident is a part of the whole memory of guilt and culpability for violence. For those who have returned from war to find that machines and their unpredictable power are still at work in the civilian world, James’s theory of trauma reveals a

source for the suppressed violence of Nick's narrative and the avoidance of war-time memory and culpability it indicates. If the final accident of the novel forms a conclusion to Fitzgerald's narrative arc dealing with automotive violence, a fulfillment of the need for release through technology, then we can follow the road backwards from Myrtle's death to Nick's recollection of the first party scene. After the guests have filed out of Gatsby's mansion following the conclusion of another wild party (described at times in confused terms suggesting the chaos of a battlefield), the narrator emerges to discover a veritable graveyard of automotive "bodies" which resembles the aftermath of the war. For Nick, the sight of a wrecked car and its drunken occupants recalls a ghastly memory of death, but one which he quickly denies though irony--the driver cannot explain how he got there or, in fact, anything about driving: "I know very little about driving--next to nothing.... I wasn't even trying" (54). This mockery of a potentially dangerous situation (we will see shortly how driving and violence are linked through Myrtle's murder) is an attempt to deny the memory of war casualties: "Although Nick's diction anticipates a dead or broken body, he sees instead a living person who denies death with drunken deadpan humor ('Did we run outa gas?') and a disfigured car, a 'coupé' ([French for] cut) with its wheels 'amputated'" (James 91). If the subject of death and disfigurement by mechanized means is downplayed, and, through the substitution of a harmless car accident, avoided, Nick can find release in his relief and "violent death has been, for the moment, warded off" (91). For this veteran, the specter of death in combat still lingers in the post-war world, but the suppression of memory through displacement onto other lives and other machines prevents Nick from coming to terms directly with his war experience.

In much the same way that Nick's past is tempered and ameliorated by the power of his own narrative negations, Gatsby's relationship to cars constitutes an avoidance of guilt through fantasy connected to fast machines and the identity they provide. Through the construction of a selfhood defined by the acquisition of material wealth, Gatsby attempts to reclaim his past by repeating it, a drive which eventually leads to his destruction and his second loss of Daisy's affection. As mentioned in a previous chapter, a large part of this fabrication through consumption is embodied by the large, opulent automobile Gatsby drives. It is a means toward an end, a return to a pre-war past which necessarily negates Gatsby's guilt and the entirety of his war experience through the erasure of the time which separates past and present. His love for fast machines, as James points out, suggests a desire to match the speed of passing time in an attempt to access it without moving past it (94).

When Gatsby turns his attention repeatedly to the hope of escape from the present into the past through mechanical velocity, his dream might be placed in a complex relationship to the theoretical perspective of F. T. Marinetti, who, as I explained in the introduction, was the founder of the radical Italian Futurist movement. Marinetti's revolutionary perspective proposes a "New Religion-Morality of Speed," which views acceleration through technology as the only power capable of shaping the future through an absolute abandonment of the past. For the Italian Futurists, the confluence of speed and machinery could be located in the automobile, which is the aggressive hope for humanity's future, as Marinetti claims with a religious fervor: "The intoxication of great speeds in cars is nothing but the joy of feeling oneself fused with the only *divinity* Forthcoming destruction of houses and cities, to make way for great meeting place for cars and planes" (96). The violence which Italian Futurism espouses, though it is grossly

exaggerated, can easily be understood as tied to the expression of release through automobility which I have outlined in the text of Fitzgerald's novel. Marinetti praised the destructive capability of speed as it was embodied by technology, but also saw machines as the means by which humanity might be reshaped into a higher form. In a similar vein, Gatsby's greatest hope for a future with Daisy, apart from trauma and the failures of his past, is to be facilitated by the wealth which his automobile represents. Through a new identity closely tied to consumption and automobility, he attains to what is, in his mind, a higher form. For the purpose of regaining Daisy, the embodiment of his dream, he has sought out a mystical "fusion" with a machine.

While Marinetti imagines a future in which the old world is decimated through machinery *by* humans (the fusion with "divinity" mentioned above), however, characters in *Gatsby* both take identity from their cars and seek a negation of their own pasts and their responsibility to others through mechanized violence. Unlike the Italian Futurists for whom F. T. Marinetti was a visionary, however, Gatsby seeks to utilize a symbol of speed, his custom-built automobile, to return to the past, rather than to destroy it. Likewise, Gatsby's love of the past, his nostalgia, is repugnant to Marinetti. This does not mean that the two figures are unlike in their adoration of machines and their identification with the car's power, however. Speed is complicated for Gatsby by war because of its trauma. Just as Marinetti sees speed as "scorn of obstacles" and as the "synthesis of every courage in action," he also understands it to be inherently "warlike" (Marinetti 95). For this reason, Gatsby's connection to automobility and to automotive machinery is problematic, ultimately claiming his life in the form of the accident which incites Wilson to react in a manner consistent with war under Tom's subtle direction. Once again, identification with speed and with technology provides both an avoidance of the veteran's past

experience of trauma in war and the hope for a restoration of pre-war innocence and the violence which originally brought about the restraint which Gatsby seeks to release in his pursuit of Daisy. Despite his efforts to outrun history, the wheels of time turn on, exacting vengeance upon their prodigal son through the repetition of violence.

By the novel's end, automobiles have claimed their place as characters in their own right, complicating human agency by in some sense exercising their own wills through acts of violence unintended by their drivers. By means of the theme of automobility, Fitzgerald illustrates the unpredictability of the post-war world and the efforts of those who inhabit it to find release through new conduits for control, cars, which in reality steal control while removing blame. The automobile comes in some way to define each of the characters in the novel, as we have seen, and in this manner *The Great Gatsby* provides a sense of early twentieth-century doubts about the possibility of determining blame for violence in a mechanized world. As humanity sped its way along the path towards greater advances in technology and began to idolize speed and power found outside of human control, the problem of agency became an overarching theme in culture. With Progress in the driver's seat, mankind was propelled forward into committing the atrocities of war not once, but twice in the same century. In a world in which mechanization enabled release and denial of the past, individuals were content to ride along in the passenger seat, egging the machine of war on to greater and greater speeds.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Implicitly, the distinction between peace and war is a distinction between necessity and freedom, repression and release, the blockage of a vital force inherent in men and groups, and the “expression” of that force in acts which are normally taboo. It is a short step to a “functional” relationship between peace and war: If war provides an outlet for bottled aggressions that cannot be released without the destruction of social stability, *then* war is a regrettable but necessary feature of stable societies.

--Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*

Nick's final reflections upon his narrative of Gatsby's fabulous life are defined by a distinctively American dream of the future. Sitting on the front steps of his friend's “huge, incoherent failure of a house,” the narrator describes the reality of that dream, seeing in Gatsby a hope that could never be fulfilled, not since those original settlers had experienced the promise of that “transitory enchanted moment . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to [their] capacity for wonder” (189). “Gatsby believed in the green light,” Nick tells the reader, “the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us” (189); Gatsby's vision was one of forward movement, what some might call progress, of relentless striving and indefatigable hope: “It eluded us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning--” (189). But Nick concludes his narrative and the novel itself with a warning about this dream of progress--despite our best efforts, embodied by Gatsby himself, we are still “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,”

and because of this backward movement, we are doomed to repeat that same history. So how does this vision of time connect with the realities of war, which have brought about the restraint yielding a need for release following the First World War? How can an examination of automobility and mechanical violence in the modern world be seen as running in reverse, away from progress and towards a repetition of the past? What can now be said about release in view of a seemingly incongruous conclusion to Fitzgerald's narrative? Lastly, does Fitzgerald present an accurate depiction of the time in which he was writing, particularly as his 1925 novel was penned during an inter-war period at the end of which the ideals of speed and excess would lead to a second global conflict defined by the same mechanized violence as that of the previous decade?

The Great Gatsby's representation of a post-war world striving for release is one that both looks to the future with hope and points towards the tendency of history to repeat itself, and this latter trend particularly as a result of the trauma endured by those living in a mechanized society. Gatsby's quest to "repeat the past" with Daisy is driven by his desire to deny the war and to express those energies which had been repressed by the experience of combat in mechanized warfare. Likewise, each of the various car accidents and affairs in the novel tend to be the echo of another past event--Daisy's accidental mowing down of Myrtle, for instance, repeats the crash which revealed Tom's first affair, and Daisy finds a return to normal life with her family through car-enabled violence. The embodiments of Progress throughout the novel, automobiles and individuals demonstrating machine-like traits or tendencies, are indeed moving humanity forward; yet, at the same time, they enable the trauma of war to be repeated, bearing the characters of the novel "back ceaselessly into the past" to unconsciously find repetition through

their actions. The “war machine,” whether represented by the automobile or more abstractly by the human characters themselves, is unavoidable and inescapable, building up steam despite the efforts of Nick and Gatsby to suppress the memory of the First World War, the first great expression of humanity’s destructive potential through modern advances in technology. This powerful machine-driven force would serve to perpetuate the violence of the first quarter of the twentieth century into the second quarter, as history would repeat itself in the form of World War Two.

Nick’s narrative indicates to the careful reader both the dangers of war and its inevitability, as humankind, and particularly those living during the last one hundred and fifty years, is driven to seek war out. While this topic has been explored by many critics of the past two centuries, Daniel Pick has provided a helpful framework for understanding the motivations behind human bellicosity in his work *War Machine*. Pick examines the popular sentiments about war and its nature during the end of the nineteenth century, leading up to the outbreak of World War One, which many see as a “divide between a prior age of innocence and twentieth-century bitter, ironic experience” (6). He dispels this notion of a completely new age of war, focusing his efforts upon locating the elusive, seemingly contradictory purpose of war in society itself, its “supposedly anchoring role in the constitution of collective identity and the advance of ‘civilisations’ on the one side; war’s intrinsic capacity to undermine, disturb and exceed predictions about its nature on the other” (7).

This understanding of conflict, in which war serves as both a destructive and a positive force, as hinted at in my epigraph from Eric J. Leed, connects in important ways to Fitzgerald’s novel. The repetitions therein, which drive the narrative action and provide motive for the actors

in the work, both lend structure to the story and undo its characters. The repetition of his loss of Daisy crushes Gatsby's hopes and dreams, but illuminates the truth behind the self-deceptions which hid his criminal activity. Through repetition of Gatsby's story, and ultimately the story of Gatsby's death, Nick's narration helps him navigate his own war experience, but in doing so he plays a part in re-enacting the same violence of war, which he seeks release from, against no fewer than three human bodies. This duality between war's creation of the drive for a recovery of what is lost and the repeated failure of that drive strongly relates to the topic of release, as violence simultaneously creates the restraint which must in some way find expression and the very violence that produced the restraint. As Pick demonstrates, this cycle of creation and destruction is at turns purposive, a creative force to be controlled for the good of society, or grossly harmful, the figurative land laid waste by a chaotic force without limit or constraint:

The figure of war is torn between such different discursive boundaries: it is seen to provide coherence, boundaries, meaning but also to erode the identity of the structures and forces that inaugurate it. War has been conceived as cohesive, purposive, stabilising, but elsewhere as the consequence of a mad and uncontrollable machine or machine age. (7)

This mechanized terror is represented in Fitzgerald's novel by the characters' pursuits of release. Whether release is sought from the trauma of actual mechanized warfare, as in the case of Nick and Gatsby, or from the restraints of pre-war society in a "machine age," as Tom, Jordan and Daisy illustrate, the themes of automobility and self-realization through technology reveal the presence of a monstrous engine driving humanity forward at breakneck speeds. Free to express its own will through the actions of its human drivers and fueled by the trauma of a war

for which blame cannot be placed, the mechanical beast Progress becomes a character in the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*, steering humanity towards a repetition of the past and its violence, hijacking Gatsby's dream for the future and piloting it into the oblivion of war.

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VITA

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