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Fabric as a Measure of Wealth in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby *and "May Day"*

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Much of F. Scott Fitzgerald's work was published in the 1920s, which is defined in America as the Jazz Age. The Jazz Age is a term to describe the era post World War I, where America began to become more modernized. With that comes the rise of a culture of consumerism that F. Scott Fitzgerald highlights through many of his characters, including the famous Jay Gatsby. Critics have discussed how the post-war modern world has impacted Fitzgerald's writing, how American materialism echoes in Fitzgerald's work, and how Fitzgerald plays with advertisement culture. These changes in America following the war contribute to a clear split between the wealthy and the working class. In this essay, I will argue that Fitzgerald integrates detailed descriptions of clothing into many of his works, such as *The Great Gatsby* and "May Day," to demonstrate the great extent to which the fabric that makes up the articles of clothing a character owns is an expression of a character's wealth.

Scholar Niko Lewis looks at the modernization of Manhattan during the Jazz Age through the lens of Fitzgerald's stories "May Day" and "My Lost City" in his critical essay "Fitzgerald's Mythical Manhattan: Coming of Age in 'May Day' and 'My Lost City.'" He starts by saying that the title of "May Day" is based on the May Day riots of 1919. "Fitzgerald alludes to the tension between the appearance of success and triumph in the city on the one hand and the rising labor movement, brought back to life after the war, which questioned America's capitalist prowess, on the other" (Lewis 109). One aspect of the rising labor movements during this time was the mass production of clothing. The specific types of clothing that are mass-produced are made of silk-like fabrics, which can be seen in both "May Day" and *The Great Gatsby*. Lewis then touches on the naturalistic traits that are seen in both "May Day" and "My Lost City." This is evident in the socioeconomic basis for political struggle that culminates in the May Day riots. Nico Lewis argues that Fitzgerald uses naturalism to revolt against his romantic sensibilities and navigate the uncertainties of the emerging modernism post-war (Lewis 111). This is the setting that Fitzgerald manages to capture in "May Day," and part of it has to do with class differences, which is shown by the way the characters dress.

Lewis then argues that the difficulties of the emerging post-war modern world had not escaped Fitzgerald, and that they fueled his "coming-of-age" writing process in "May Day" and "My Lost City." He cites another literary scholar, Matthew J. Bruccoli, who

> reminds us that, for Fitzgerald, writing was a self-historiographic need wherein "things were not fully experienced until he had written about them" (33). The result is not only an insight into Fitzgerald's

> experience of New York in 1919 but also an illustrative presentation of what the beginnings of modernity felt like for Americans of various social classes (Lewis 112).

Fitzgerald accomplishes the illustration of a blooming modernity through disconnectedness, which, according to Lewis, is a tool for Fitzgerald to gain an understanding of the challenges he witnessed in New York at the time. Scholars preached "terrible honesty," in a phrase coined by American literary historian Ann Douglas, over "make-believe" points of view. This involves letting go of naivety and the notion that being comfortable with the past guarantees comfort in the future. Lewis ties this terrible honesty to "May Day," saying that "as a key 'myth' of Fitzgerald's Manhattan, ["May Day"] shows [Fitzgerald's] emotional and intellectual shift from an idealized vision of the New York he visited in adolescence to a reluctant admission of its complex inconsistencies of hope and despair" (Lewis 114). The shift from Fitzgerald's idealistic view in adolescence to the acceptance of the complexities of post-war modernism demonstrates his willingness to adapt the perspective of "terrible honesty." This is further supported by his characters, who clearly struggle with class differences, which is demonstrated by the types of resources each character can access.

Lewis then brings up the contrast between life and dream in "May Day," which, "has a resonance in 'My Lost City' as Fitzgerald comes to terms with the way real life devastated his own dreams. His depictions of Gordon and Edith in 1920 show his own struggle against his romanticism" (Lewis 125). He then connects this to how both Fitzgerald and Zelda are called back to New York, which is metaphorically a siren, derailing him from his desire for serious writing and an orderly life. The romance of the city pulls Fitzgerald closer to Zelda, just as Gordon cannot seem to free himself from Jewel. Fitzgerald's writing suffers because he is unable to give up New York entirely. The desire to escape from reality is shown through the desperation of the characters to avoid the pain of the aftermath of World War I. Overall, Lewis argues that Fitzgerald uses "May Day" as an attempt to break away from the romanticized version of New York and instead highlight the socioeconomic despair through his character Gordon Sterrett.

Another literary critic, Lauren Rule-Maxwell, explores, through a Keatsian lens, American materialism and the political and economic critiques in images of clothing and fashion in Fitzgerald's works in her essay "The New Emperor's Clothes: Keatsian Echoes and American Materialism in *The Great Gatsby*." Rule-Maxwell starts by saying that, "Fitzgerald suggests that because gentleman's clothes historically symbolize 'the power that man must hold that passes from race to race,' America's acquisition of 'the style of man,' while seemingly 'subtle' and superficial, signifies a much more meaningful transfer of global power from the Great Britain to the United States" (Rule-Maxwell 57). This establishes the fact that with the Jazz Age came the increased prevalence of fashion. Rule-Maxwell also argues that:

> During the ten years of the Jazz Age, which spanned from the May Day riots of 1919 to the stock market crash of 1929, Americans became "alienat[ed]...from the prevailing order," wondering with disillusionment if "maybe we had gone to war for J.P. Morgan's loans after all" (13). Reasoning that "we were tired of Great Causes," he observes that instead of responding with indignation, Americans channeled all of their "nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War" into a culture of consumption (Rule-Maxwell 59).

Mass production of clothing was one factor that contributed to this. It is seen in "May Day" with the "family of thick silk shirts littered on the chairs amid impressive neckties and soft woollen socks," (Fitzgerald 852) and it is also seen with Myrtle Wilson's frivolous spending habits in *The Great Gatsby*. Rule-Maxwell then goes on to say that Fitzgerald's detailed images of clothing "symbolize a complicated engagement with materialism because they both celebrate and pass judgment on the way Americans, including Fitzgerald himself, fashioned themselves with cloaks of prosperity, thus reflecting an ambivalent negotiation of wealth and position on an individual and national level" (Rule-Maxwell 59). These symbols reflect the changing of American identities after World War I, and they are emblematic

of the American Dream, which romanticizes wealth and acts of conquest. This is seen clearly in *The Great Gatsby* when Myrtle wears a chiffon dress which changes her personality.

For most of her essay, Rule-Maxwell focuses on the scene in *The Great Gatsby* where Daisy weeps over Gatsby's beautiful shirts. She, like many other critics such as Dan McCall, George Monteiro, and Harold Bloom, links this scene to John Keats, who is Fitzgerald's favorite poet. She claims that the Keatsian echoes in this scene "signify much more than rewriting of a romantic narrative, and that they even more powerfully invoke Keats' negative capability, his preoccupation with materialism, and his warnings about the symbolic force of material objects" (Rule-Maxwell 60). Keats' influences create a commentary on American materialism that is not limited to Gatsby's character but can be applied to the larger culture of consumption in the United States. Rule-Maxwell adds context of specific facets of Keats' life and writing that Fitzgerald admires and associates himself with. For example, the two of them have some commonalities. They both could not afford to wed their sweethearts, and they both had to overcome social and class barriers in hopes of achieving romance. One difference though is that "[u]nlike Fitzgerald, who had the ability to 'pass' in high society, Keats was characterized by members of the literary establishment as an ill-bred 'Cockney,' implying that he was a social climber who 'lacked taste and education but was full of 'vulgar' pretension' (Wu 37)" (Rule-Maxwell 60). Rule-Maxwell then goes on to say that both Keats and Fitzgerald were highly conscious of both the financial necessity of their literary production and the ways in which the success of their production was tied to images of themselves as authors and themselves as products in the literary marketplace. The images for both writers were grounded in upward mobility and projections of class identity. Both authors also focused on creating representations of themselves and their relationships with women, which invoked deep-seated frustration about the impossibility of material and literary ideals. Each of them has examples of this symbolic relationship in many works of literature. For Keats, it is present in his odes as well as his romance poems, for example, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1820), "The Eve of St. Agnes," "Lamia" (1820), and "Isabella" (1820). This concept is also seen in some of Fitzgerald's works, such as *This Side of Paradise, The Beautiful and Damned, The Great Gatsby, Tender is the Night,* and many of his short stories. Like Keats, Fitzgerald displays a sense of melancholic awareness in his works.

Rule-Maxwell introduces her next topic in the essay with a heading that says "Negative Capability and the American Dream." She talks about how Fitzgerald recognizes the hopelessness of the post-war modern world, yet at the same time is determined to create a positive shift, using his writing as a tool to provoke change. This section goes more into detail about Keats' influence on Fitzgerald. He was very familiar with Keats' poems, letters, and biographies, and even knew the famous passage in which Keats discusses *"Negative Capability"* as the principal quality of a man of literary achievement:

> "[S]everal things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously–I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason…" (*Letters of John Keats*, quoted in Rule-Maxwell 63-64).

It is argued by some critics that the idea of *Negative Capability* has influenced some of Fitzgerald's characters, such as Gatsby and Nick Carraway. In a letter to his daughter, Fitzgerald noted specific qualities he admires in Keats' poetry, such as its "chime," its "exquisite inner mechanics," and its "inevitable" rhythmic progression, which seamlessly anticipates "every syllable." He singles out "The Eve of St. Agnes" for its imagery, claiming that it "has the richest, most sensuous imagery in English, not excepting Shakespeare" (quoted in Rule-Maxwell 65). Rule-Maxwell then makes the claim that Fitzgerald reproduces the imagery of "The Eve of St. Agnes" in the central shirt scene of *The Great Gatsby*. She argues that the Keatsian echoes "not only function to heighten its sensuality and luxuriousness, but also discursively to inscribe a materialism of poetic resistance" (*Life in Letters*, quoted in Rule-Maxwell 66). Overall, Rule-Maxwell's aim in this essay was to discuss the socioeconomic

implications of materialism and consumption culture mainly through the lens of Keatsian-influenced scenes in *The Great Gatsby*, such as the shirt scene, which, to many critics, is the central scene of the novel.

Critic Thomas Dilworth discusses *The Great Gatsby* in relation to the dapper archetype of the Arrow Collar Man. When the novel was published in 1925, the Arrow Collar Man was a universally familiar, high-quality advertising campaign. Dilworth claims that "it helps to juxtapose the lives of the smart set in and around New York in the 1920s with the conventions of contemporary advertisement. Moreover, because the intervisuality involves clothing as defining personal image, it suggests targeted social engagement, disguise, pretense of performance, and evokes the false yet powerful cliché, 'clothes make the man'" (Dilworth 81). Dilworth mentions the scene in chapter 7 of *The Great Gatsby* when Daisy and Tom Buchanan are with Nick Carraway, Jordan Baker, and Jay Gatsby in the Buchanan home in West Egg. In this scene, Daisy tells Gatsby that he resembles "the advertisement of the man," (Fitzgerald 74) implying that Gatsby should be familiar with this advertisement. Dilworth says that Fitzgerald expects the contemporary reader to know what advertisement Daisy is referring to. The earlier readers of the novel would have known, but later readers would be left wondering what the advertisement was. Dilworth recounts a conversation he had in 1981 with Virgil Thomson, an American composer and critic who met Fitzgerald in Paris in 1925, the year *The Great Gatsby* was published. In this conversation, Dilworth received his first hint that the advertisement Daisy is referring to is the Arrow Collar Man, because Thomson described the young Fitzgerald as well as the young T.S. Eliot to him by saying that "they both looked like Arrow Collar ads" (Dilworth 83).

Dilworth then describes the history of the advertisement in great detail. The Arrow Collar Man was created by the fashion illustrator J. C. Leyendecker for Cluett, Peabody & Co. of Troy, New York, which operated the largest collar, cuff, and shirt factory in the world. "Essentially a pinup boy," (Dilworth 83) this advertisement was meant to be an idealized figure of masculinity during the Jazz Age. The bulk of Dilworth's essay educates readers on what the Arrow Collar Man is and how this advertisement manifests in multiple ways in *The Great Gatsby*.

A prominent example of clothing descriptions in "May Day" is towards the beginning of the story, where two of the main characters, Gordon Sterrett and Phillip Dean, are introduced. When the two meet at a hotel, Phillip goes to the bathroom and:

> [Gordon's] dark eyes roved nervously around the room, resting for a moment on a great English traveling bag in the corner and on a family of thick silk shirts littered on the chairs amid impressive neckties and soft woollen socks.
>
> Gordon rose and, picking up one of the shirts, gave it a minute examination. It was a very heavy silk, yellow, with a pale blue stripe–and there were nearly a dozen of them. He stared involuntarily at his own shirt cuffs–they were ragged and linty at the edges and soiled to a faint gray. Dropping the silk shirt, he held his coat-sleeves down and worked the frayed shirt-cuffs up till they were out of sight. Then he went to the mirror and looked at himself with listless, unhappy interest. His tie, of former glory, was faded and thumb-creased–it served no longer to hide the jagged buttonholes of his collar. He thought, quite without amusement, that only three years before he had received a scattering vote in the senior elections at college for being the best-dressed man in his class (Fitzgerald 852).

In this scene, Gordon is comparing himself to Phillip. Judging by the way he looks at himself, Gordon is insecure about his clothes, which were once in style, as three years prior to the story, he was considered well-dressed, the "best dressed man" in his class, to be specific. But in the present times of "May Day," mass production of expensive materials has increased, and Gordon can no longer afford what is in style. He becomes envious of what Phillip has and asks him for money in desperation. Phillip responds that he does not feel comfortable because his family monitors how he spends his money and makes sure he does not abuse it. Despite this, Gordon still hopes for the money and also attends the Gamma Psi fraternity dance in hopes of pursuing his affair with Edith Bradlin, which had fizzled out during the war. Lewis says that "In Gordon's case, the party is a last hope of redemption as he

anxiously waits for his other more tangible hope in the form of Phillip Dean's money. The money will disentangle him from Jewel Hudson, and the party will set him back on his rightful path into a romantic future with Edith. This hope gives his otherwise chaotic mood a momentary sense of calm and order" (Lewis 120). Essentially, the party seems to Gordon like an opportunity to get his life back on track following the turmoil from the war. What Lewis does not say here is that the money will also grant Gordon the opportunity to buy nicer clothes, which will help him fit in with his more financially well-off peers. Overall, Gordon has desires to both earn money and pursue a romantic relationship with Edith, and his shame for his current situation is reflected in the shabby suit he wears.

Phillip Dean, on the other hand, tells a very different story about his wealth based on the clothing he owns. Fitzgerald introduces him shortly after Gordon is seen looking for him at the hotel. "A few minutes later Phillip Dean, dressed in blue silk pajamas, opened his door and the two young men greeted each other with a half-embarrassed exuberance. They were both about twenty-four, Yale graduates of the year before the war; but there the resemblance stopped abruptly" (Fitzgerald 851). It is implied through the descriptions of each man's appearance that the types of clothing they are wearing come from different types of fabric. Phillip's pajamas are expensive silk, while Gordon's suit is worn out and more cheaply made. Rule-Maxwell says that "The contrast between Gordon's and Phillip's modes of dress contributes to a broader picture Fitzgerald paints about the ways in which projections of American identity after World War I became increasingly linked to patterns of consumption" (Rule-Maxwell 58). This supports the idea that, based on dress alone, Phillip is noticeably wealthier than Gordon. Since Phillip possesses greater wealth, he can achieve more frivolous spending than Gordon. Phillip is careful with how he spends his money, but nevertheless, he has access to more expensive resources than Gordon. This demonstrates that the American culture of consumerism is only built for those who can afford it. It is apparent that in "May Day," Phillip Dean and Gordon Sterrett are emblematic of the class differences that arose during the Jazz Age simply by how they dress and present themselves.

There are many detailed descriptions of clothing in *The Great Gatsby*. Still, the most prominent scene that has to do with fashion is the scene in chapter five of the novel where Nick, Daisy, and Gatsby are touring Gatsby's apartment. Readers are introduced to Gatsby's exquisite wardrobe, which evokes an extreme emotional response in Daisy:

> Recovering himself in a minute [Gatsby] opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high.
>
> "I've got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall."
>
> He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-coloured disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher–shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.
>
> "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such–such beautiful shirts before" (Fitzgerald 58).

Many critics have looked at this scene through different lenses. Rule-Maxwell compares the shirt scene to the food descriptions in Porphyro's feast in "The Eve of St. Agnes." She specifically notes that both passages use the word "heap" to describe the excess of goods available for consumption. Since Gatsby has acquired wealth, he has the ability to engage in the purchase of tons of these luxury shirts. Rule-Maxwell also argues that there is a certain sexual tension in the scene because "[a]s Gatsby indicates to Daisy before presenting her the shirts, his consumption patterns follow a British fashion standard as he tries, like Tom, to dress the part of an English gentleman in hopes of making himself

more desirable" (Rule-Maxwell 70). Daisy's response is erotic in the sense that she values Gatsby's desirable possessions more than she values Gatsby himself.

Dilworth also analyzes this scene through the lens of the Arrow Collar Man. He argues in his analysis of the shirt scene that "[Gatsby's] action and [Daisy's] reaction involve an equal balance of opulent materialism and erotic infatuation, a combination irreducibly astonishing in its effect" (Dilworth 86). Materialism refers to the fact that the quality of the shirt's fabric determines the cost of the shirt; therefore, the type of shirt a man has is indicative of his wealth. A large number of these shirts implies that Gatsby is extremely wealthy. Daisy's response is seen as intimate because "clothing is, after all, an extension of the skin" (Dilworth 86).

While I agree with Rule-Maxwell's and Dilworth's claims, I personally believe that Daisy is reacting the way she is because she is overwhelmed. She is overwhelmed by how much Gatsby has changed since she first met him. For context, Gatsby and Daisy first met in 1917 and were a couple back then. At the time, Gatsby was "penniless" while Daisy possessed great wealth, beauty, and status. The difference between Gatsby and Daisy's relationship in 1917 versus their affair in the present times of the novel, besides the fact that Daisy is now married to Tom, is that Gatsby has acquired wealth. He throws lavish parties and makes frivolous purchases, including these shirts, and a pool that is not used until his death at the end of the novel. Rule-Maxwell even brings up the point that "Gatsby does not seem to actually wear the beautiful clothes he has bought–we often see him dressed in his characteristic pink suit," (Rule-Maxwell 72) which Tom pokes fun at. This is proof that Gatsby simply owns these luxury clothes to have them around as objects of wealth. Because his wealth is not inherited, Gatsby finds himself going to extreme measures to flaunt it in an effort to maintain his image. This evokes a reaction that is rather odd, especially for Daisy, since she has money, meaning she has likely seen similar shirts multiple times. The reason for her reaction does not just have to do with admiration or intimacy; it has to do with the pure shock of how these shirts came to be since the last time she saw Gatsby prior to the novel's timeline. The shirt scene becomes central to the novel because it demonstrates the extent to which wealth and materialism are intertwined.

Overall, it is clear that Fitzgerald intentionally includes scenes with visceral descriptions of clothes to represent archetypes of both the wealthy and the poor working class. The main purpose is to show that the more expensive the fabric of an outfit a character is wearing, the wealthier they are. Niko Lewis gives historical context of the title of Fitzgerald's "May Day," which is based on the May Day riots of 1919, and he discusses how Fitzgerald's writing both suffers and prospers with the challenges that Americans faced in the post-war modern world. Lewis does not directly mention fashion, but it was something that was often romanticized, especially through advertisements and store window displays. Fitzgerald's work attempts to break away from the romanticized version of New York after World War I and instead uses characters' differences in fashion as a way to show the contrast between the rich and the poor. Lauren Rule-Maxwell delves into significant scenes in Fitzgerald's work involving fashion, such as the famous shirt scene in *The Great Gatsby*, and she analyzes them with the context that Fitzgerald was heavily influenced by John Keats. Her main argument is that the Keatsian echoes in the shirt scene further emphasize the sensual nature of the luxurious fabrics and capture materialism in a poetic sense. Thomas Dilworth also analyzes prominent scenes in *The Great Gatsby*, including the shirt scene, yet his analysis focuses on the Arrow Collar Man, which is an advertisement that is an idealized version of a wealthy man. This advertisement, which is for the largest collar, cuff, and shirt factory in the world, comes up in various ways in *The Great Gatsby*, the most notable being that Daisy mentions Gatsby's resemblance to the archetype.

All of this can be connected to Ann Douglas's essay "The Culture of Momentum." In her essay, Douglas argues that "[t]he war organized and mobilized America's productive capacities on every front, from the steel interests and the auto business to the fashion, advertising, and movie industries, and it did so at no apparent expense to America" (Douglas 181). Essentially, the war has created an economy based on fast-paced mass production and consumption. This is a driving force in the creation

of Fitzgerald's scenes that allude to the fashion industry and how high-quality clothing demonstrates great wealth.

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