

Toward a Loopier Logic: Magical Realism and *The Great Gatsby*

“Every definition is a negation” (*Spinoza* 260¹)

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Abstract

Much of literary studies organizes itself through two major classifications: period and genre. But what do these categories miss? And how does engaging literature through these lenses obscure conversations, creating, as Eric Hayot notes, an artificial sense of “fixity”? Rather than advocating a *deconstruction* of category within literary analysis, I suggest a *reconstructive* approach, one that recognizes the value of broad categorization while also confronting the porous nature of these boundaries. To illustrate such an approach, I reframe F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of magical realism, noting the distinct similarities that Fitzgerald’s work holds with the tradition. I track this connection through two sources, 1.) magical realism’s oft-overlooked inception in Europe’s post-expressionist art scene, a scene in which Fitzgerald was intimately involved and 2.) the historical transition from tangible to intangible that occurred within the Global West at the time Fitzgerald was writing — the rise of the speculative money market, the publication of Einstein’s general and special theories of relativity, the invention of telecommunication and radio. The result, I argue, is an imperfect yet valuable amalgamation of concepts and ideas. By challenging overly rigid conceptualizations, we recreate a space for wonder, an appreciation for the rich confusions that make up the literary tradition.

¹ In *The Letters*, Shirley translates the phrase “omnis determinatio est negatio” as “determination is negation” (260). However, as Eric Hayot notes in “Against Periodization,” the above translation may, in fact, more accurately capture Spinoza’s original point (753)

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Introduction

A central tenet of the “against periodization” movement as defined by Eric Hayot is a desire to confront the fundamentally arbitrary nature of certain demarcative classifications and to combat the misleading impression of “fixity” that periodization engenders (270). What truly separates late Romantics from early Victorians, and is that separation truly more tangible than that which separates early Victorians and late Victorians? Why has the “long” eighteenth century become now even longer than ever? To this conversation, one could add the limits of genre qualifications. In her October 2007 introduction to a special issue of PMLA titled *Remapping Genre*, Wai Chee Dimock notes this exact problem, terming genre a “vexed attempt to deal with material that might or might not fit into [clean categories]” (1378). Central to this conversation is the assertion that both forms of classification — genrefication and periodization — are, fundamentally, untruths, as fictitious in nature as the works they attempt to classify.

In her introduction, Dimock asks readers to consider the following formative question, one that proves foundational to the work that I undertake: “What would literary studies look like if it were organized by genres in this unfinished sense, with spillovers at front and center? What dividing lines could still be maintained? And what kinds of knowledge would be generated as a result, answering to what conception of the humanities?” (1378). In doing so, Dimmock echoes the negative dialectics of Frankfurt philosopher Theodor Adorno, who argued that no objects fit into their concepts without “leaving a remainder,” a set of contradictions that highlight the inadequacy of rigid conceptualizations (*Negative Dialectics* 5). This remainder, within Adornian thought, highlights the “untruth of identity,” the inescapable reality that no concept can “exhaust the thing conceived” (5). All attempts at classification are, by both process and form, inadequate, a doomed, Hegelian-esque attempt to work towards a beatific conception of ideation that does not exist—or at the very least is not attainable.

Yet, classifications of these sorts are not entirely without purpose. Even as he critiques periodization, Hayot concedes that evidentiary and definitional categories are the very structures that “make knowledge possible” (740). Adorno admits a similar reality, noting that “the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself,” adding simply that “To think is identity” (*Negative Dialectics* 5). Indeed, without such generalizations, sweeping categorical critiques such as Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* or Michel

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* would not be possible. Organization conceptions are a necessary component of ideation; they provide scholars with the framework and common language necessary for broad scale literary and historical analysis. So, critics are confronted with a paradox: conceptualizations are fundamentally flawed; they are also necessary. What then can we do?

The response that I (and others³) posit is a fundamentally utilitarian one: I propose that we acknowledge the porous nature of boundaries by blurring categorizations where necessary, acknowledging, in the process, that the fictions we create, though useful, are fictions none-the-less. Should scholars classify Octavia Butler's *Kindred* as science fiction? Perhaps. Does viewing it as such help scholars better interpolate important concepts? Just as importantly, does submitting the novel to specific genre categorizations also obscure analysis? I organize this foray around the following guiding hermeneutic: A deep suspicion of "de" movements and a subsequent, equally radical embrace of "re" orientations⁴. Thus, instead of deconstructing genre, scholars within this discipline aim to continuously reconstruct genre. Similarly, rather than advocating de-periodization, we invoke re-periodization. In doing so, I hope to model an Adorno-inspired effort towards re-enchantment, an acknowledgment of the practical value of Enlightenment dialectics that also recognizes the enchanting powers unlocked by a society that "dares to abolish the false absolute" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 33).

To illustrate this concept, I channel this conversation through an analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of magical realism. From the outset, I admit that the following argument is flawed. The literary offshoots of the magical realist movement only truly gain traction in the Americas in the late 1930s, near the end of Fitzgerald's writing career, and they did so predominantly in Latin America, where names such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Isabel Allende have become effectively synonymous with the genre. This

³While not explicitly announced as such, this utilitarian approach to genre has an established history in the academic literature. In "An Introduction to Genre Theory, for example, Daniel Chandler uses specifically utilitarian language to defend the value of genre, writing that genre, though fraught, can "help orient readers towards appropriate assumptions and expectations about a text," attitudes that are "*useful* in making sense of it" (8, emphasis added). Stephen Owen, similarly, terms genre classification as a "passport issued by the novel," one that is a "great convenience for travel across languages and centuries" (1390).

⁴ Here, I build on the work of Rita Felski who makes a similar argument in *The Limits of Critique*: "We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the "de" prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the "re" prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perceptions. Works of art do not only subvert but also convert; they do not only inform but also transform" (17)

fiction, incomplete and cumbersome, is, in some ways, the point of this work. By connecting F. Scott Fitzgerald to the magical realist tradition, I emphasize a “loopier logic,” one that, while unintuitive, is a *logic* none-the-less. While flawed, I do not believe my argument to be ahistorical or logically incoherent, both of which would disqualify it from serving its fundamental purpose — to elucidate rather than obscure reality. In connecting Fitzgerald with magical realism, I hope to exemplify a *soft* approach to narrative classification, one that demonstrates the ways that a more playful approach to concept/object models can open new modes of thinking for both subject and category without holding so tight to those modes that other approaches are obscured.

Why Fitzgerald

I’ve chosen Fitzgerald to illustrate this concept for a few prominent reasons. First, as scholar Kim Sasser notes, Fitzgerald’s body of work has a “peculiarly ambiguous relationship” with literary classification” (181). Predominantly, historians view him as a modernist, a key member of Gertrude Stein’s “Lost Generation” which helped form the Anglo-European literary field post World War I (Stern 254). Further attempts to categorize him, however, have produced widely varied results. Fitzgerald, when naming his literary influences, does little to clear up confusion, recognizing science fiction writer H.G. Wells, iconoclast Samuel Butler, realist Bernard Shaw, gothic romantic Oscar Wilde, and romantic-realist Joseph Conrad (*A Short Autobiography* 7). Elsewhere, he is associated with prominent literary figures such as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound, yet his literary style remains notably distinct from his contemporaries. John Kuehl notes this confusion, writing that Fitzgerald blends lines between genres, becoming simultaneously “both a romantic and a realist” (413). Fahimeh Keshmiri and Mina Mahdikhani describe his style as “completely his own . . . the most incomparable aspect of his prose,” a loose blending of realism, modernism, and existentialism (78).

Still, specific connections between Fitzgerald and magical realism remain largely unexplored within Fitzgerald criticism — largely but not entirely. Scholar Kim Sasser has already “broken ground” within this conversation, outlining persuasively the ways that Fitzgerald’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” engages with magical realist conventions. Drawing from Fitzgerald biographer and critic Matthew J. Bruccoli, Sasser argues that Fitzgerald’s aims in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” — in the words of Bruccoli to “to make impossible events convincing” (*Short Stories* 159)— mirror closely the narrative goals of

magical realists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez who also attempted to articulate the supernatural and fantastic “with the expression of a brick face” (Sasser 181). Sasser is careful to note that alternative methods of reality bending existed within American fiction well before “Benjamin Button” — think, for example, of Mark Twain’s *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), or James Branch Cabell’s *Jurgen* (1919), to name a few. The element that separates “Benjamin Button” — and later, I will argue, *The Great Gatsby* — from these previous works of fantasy is the text’s lack of what scholars term “antinomy,” the internal conflict present in magical realist texts created by the simultaneous presence of two different codes, one natural and the other supernatural (Chandler 10-12). In most supernatural texts, conflict exists between the natural and supernatural elements of the text because one reality (generally the natural) is elevated above the other. That element then becomes the lens by which the other is read. In magical realism, however, no such conflict exists; instead, the natural and supernatural exist simultaneously on the same plane, neither gaining textual supremacy.

My own aim in this piece is simultaneously less and more ambitious than Sasser’s. In relation to the latter, I do intend to expand Sasser’s argument, demonstrating that magical realist conventions do not just appear within a few select “magical” works but rather permeate a broader segment of Fitzgerald’s body of work, including those works that are traditionally thought of as “realistic” writing. That said, the only work of Fitzgerald’s that fits snugly into the genre of magical realism is, as Sasser suggests, “Benjamin Button.” My aim, rather, is to model a much less computational approach to classification, one that filters Fitzgerald’s work through the rich literary tradition magical realism scholarship provides. In some ways, the glove fits surprisingly well; in others it does not. Put more succinctly, my goal in this article is not to claim that the literary community should view F. Scott Fitzgerald strictly as a magical realist writer; to do so would obscure the right ambivalence that defines Fitzgerald’s signature style. Rather, I seek to note the close ancestral connection between Fitzgerald and the magical realist literary movement.

The evolutionarily derived “ancestor” analogy proves especially apt here in that it explains certain stylistic and thematic overlap while simultaneously allowing for the space necessarily present between diverging evolutionary lines. Fitzgerald, in this analogy, is a near

ancestral “cousin” of Carpentier, Marquez, Esquivel, and Allende, not a paternal or even sibling figure. Unequivocally, I do not seek to reformulate magical realism’s rich Latin tradition as somehow derivative of North American literary style as pioneered by Fitzgerald. While Latin American magical realism may have been tagged under a European label and likely shares some ideological tail-wind with certain global intellectual trends that impacted the world at large, the Latin American magical realist tradition sprang up as a unique and independent literary movement, derivative of and responsive to a variety of elements unique to Latin American experience. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how two separate but linked movements owe common stylistic and topical ancestry to a particular social, artistic, and political historical strand. To return to the evolutionary metaphor, perhaps the beaks on these finches are so curiously similar because they have, as their aim, a common goal—the breaking open of coconuts for example.

Magical Realism’s Roots

Before engaging in a close reading of Fitzgerald’s texts, I note two historical and cultural actualities that underpin my argument: 1. the proximate setting which places Fitzgerald near the epicenter of magical realism’s often overlooked inception in Europe’s post-expressionist art scene and 2. the historical transition from tangible to intangible that occurred within the Global West at the time Fitzgerald was writing. The first of these ideas requires only a brief aside while the second requires a lengthier explanation.

First, although magical realism owes much of its present popularity to its notable Latin American contributors, scholars such as Maggie Ann Bowers, Amaryll Chanady, and Wendy Faris track the term magical realism back to German art critic Franz Roh’s 1925 work *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*⁵, a work that functioned as a critical attempt to create dialogue around a new form of post-expressionist painting originating out of post-World War I Germany (Bowers 9). As an art form, magical realism differed from its more recent predecessors primarily in its rejection of pure expressionist aesthetics in favor of largely literal portrayals of its subjects. As subjects, however, Roh’s magical realists often incorporated mystical, non-material aspects of reality into their art, thereby separating themselves from realist traditions as well. The purpose of this new art form, Roh argues is “not to discover the spirit beginning with objects but, on the contrary, to discover

⁵ Post-expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting

objects beginning with the spirit” (24). In magical realism, neither object nor spirit dominates expression; rather, each expression informs the other, amalgamating reality in “the center of visibility” (Asayesh and Arargüç 29). It is worth noting that many of Fitzgerald’s most formative writing years, those immediately following World War I, occurred under this post-expressionist boom. Although post-expressionism had already crossed the Atlantic by the 1920’s, Fitzgerald’s post-expressionist connection is further enhanced by his European connections, connections that began in May 1924, when he and Zelda made the first of several extended stays in Europe. Biographer Andre LeVot terms the trip “a voyage of discovery” for the Fitzgeralds, noting specifically the Fitzgeralds’ engagement with the continent’s artistic scene (171).

The conceptual reality this new artistic style embodied provided Fitzgerald a means by which he could capture the expeditiously changing reality within the global West, a reality that was rapidly blurring the lines between reality and fiction. In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern expounds on this problem, noting that between 1880 and World War I, a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture destabilized reality, calling into question stable understandings of time and space. “The result,” Kern argues, “was a transformation of the dimension of life and thought” (1-2). As technology changed, new ways of understanding this ethereal world became necessary. These changes extended from the technological to the every day. Wealth in Fitzgerald’s day, for example, was simultaneously tangible and intangible: tangible in the clothing and bodies of the American people and of the characters Fitzgerald’s creates, but also intangible in the form of a newly formulated system of buying known as credit.

Scientific advancement such as Albert Einstein’s breakthroughs in special and general relativity further complicated this already ambiguous landscape. As scholar Raymond Vince notes, an important aspect of understanding Fitzgerald’s prose rests in one’s understanding of the paradigm shift present after Einstein’s revolutionary breakthroughs articulated in his first five articles published at the beginning of the twentieth century (90). Einstein’s discoveries, even to the present mind, defy intuition, opening the door to the instability of modern theoretical physics through its introduction of the impermanence of gravity, space, and time. To the inhabitants of the early twentieth century, Vince argues, its intellectual ramifications were catastrophic. They disjoined reality, necessitating “a revolutionary transformation of the prevailing scientific and cultural metaphors” (87). Increasingly, the world appeared unstable and ambiguous; it was, in a

sense, magical, a place in which the tidy and intuitive laws of Newtonian physics crumbled under the fragmented interpolations of quantum theory. Connecting this reading directly to Fitzgerald's most famous writing, Vince argues that the character of Jay Gatsby must, like the America he represents, stand ambiguous, viewed symbolically through the new mythic lens technological and scientific advancement afforded. Fitzgerald's novel, Vince explains, "powerfully evokes a new reality . . . the profound shift that has redefined our view of space and time, matter and energy" (93).

To capture this change, Fitzgerald rejected the mimetic, mirror-first attempts at representing reality common among his predecessors. Certainly, American writers pre-Fitzgerald were playing with form, manipulating reality to create "supernatural" stories.⁶ Still, these writers' forays into the supernatural operate largely within a paradigm built off the tension created by the conflict that arises from the collision of two incompatible codes. No such conflict exists within much of Fitzgerald's fiction. Simultaneously, Fitzgerald's style differentiates itself from the more heady and detached aesthetics of many of his modernist contemporaries; Fitzgerald is not, for example, a Stein, Joyce, or a Faulkner, artists whose work challenges mimesis explicitly. Rather, I argue, Fitzgerald exists within that vague in-between, a realist in one sense but not entirely so, a bridge between the magical and the real.

Thematic Connections

While Fitzgerald may have been influenced by the European rather than the Latin American strain of magical realism, his thematic connection to the genre correlates strongly with his Latin American counterparts. For many Latin American writers, magical realism made sense culturally because it provided a way for them to express their national identities not just internally but more importantly with the world at large, giving Latin America "an international language" (Donoso 10). B.J. Geetha notes the cultural ties of magical realism, calling acclaimed Columbian magical realist Gabriel Garcia Marquez the "voice to Latin America" (345). Alejo Carpentier, in his canonical essay "On the Marvelous Real in America," further expands on this sentiment, arguing that magical realism—or "the marvelous real" as he terms it—gained popularity in the Americas as a literary form primarily because it corresponds with Central and South

⁶ Consider, for example, writers such as Washington Irving, Henry James, Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Nathaniel Hawthorne, etc.

American history. “[Latin American] style is reaffirmed throughout [its] history” (83). Carpentier writes, adding at the close of his essay the following rhetorical question: “After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?” (88). For writers such as Marquez and Carpentier, magical realism was not just an experimental, artistic genre — it was a way for them to tangibly engage in the surreal but experientially true nature of their past and to communicate that instability with the world. Because of this focus, magical realism is often historical in nature, a way for writers to address (and more importantly challenge) war, suffering, and politics freely and honestly (Bowers 75-77).

Fitzgerald’s writing adopts a similarly historical lens. Critic Edwin S. Fussell describes Fitzgerald as a man with a “sharp awareness of American society,” and writer John Rohrkemper singles out *The Great Gatsby*, calling it, “perhaps the richest meditation on American history to appear in our fiction” (“Brave New World” 293; “The Allusive Past” 153). It is, in part, through Fitzgerald’s literature that people past and present interpreted this new phase in American history, one that only loosely resembled the America represented in Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Fitzgerald’s role as a chronicler of the Jazz Age is crucial to understanding his literary significance. Rohrkemper goes on to write that “More than anything else, it is Fitzgerald’s use of historical allusion which gives *The Great Gatsby* its delicate weight, its buoyant profundity” (155).

Fitzgerald was not incognizant of his role as a historian; his conscious focus on representing United States history is apparent in *The Great Gatsby*, a work that he attempted to rename *Under the Red, White, and Blue* in the last moments before publication⁷ (Brucoli 48). Once readers begin to pick out the various nationalistic themes found within the novel, the reason for Fitzgerald’s desired title change becomes apparent. One of the novel’s most prevalent themes is American history, and, more specifically, the ways in which the United States’ past affects its present. Fitzgerald manifests this historical perspective through his characters’ continuous backward gaze toward the past, a theme that coalesces around the character of Jay Gatsby, a man who, for the majority of the novel, has a widely discussed yet largely indiscernible history. Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator, recounts the numerous rumors that circulate about Gatsby; some people theorize that he is a war hero, others that he was a criminal, and still others

⁷ Indeed, the only thing that saved the novel’s now iconic title was the fact that Fitzgerald sent the desired change in barely too late, just days after production of the book with its original title had already commenced.

that he was a German spy. A visitor at one of Gatsby's parties even posits that Gatsby has the look of a murderer and that she has heard rumors that "he killed a man once" (36). The various stories surrounding Gatsby, however, do little to mold Gatsby's past into a discernible shape. After hearing several theories, Carraway states that "A dim background started to take shape behind him, but . . . it faded away" (40). Gatsby remains to him an anomaly, an ahistorical figure, with so many stories about his past that each story becomes suspect. Actually meeting Gatsby and hearing his version of his past does nothing to solidify this picture for Carraway. Throughout the narrative, he frequently questions Gatsby's sincerity; noting the subtle inconsistencies in Gatsby's stories and his awkward methods of storytelling, Carraway wonders "if there wasn't something a little sinister about him, after all" (52). Gatsby's past, for the majority of the narrative, is a source of ambiguity, amorphous and constantly in doubt. This murky past mirrors American history, a history that was also cloudy at the time as the United States attempted to understand and come to grips with its own past transgressions. This challenging of American history connects *The Great Gatsby* in a second way to the genre of magical realism, a genre that, according to Bowers, not only evokes the past but also "questions the notion of history" (7). Gatsby's ambiguous history in many ways mirrors the larger American story Fitzgerald attempts to capture.

As the novel progresses, Gatsby's past, though still ambiguous, begins to take some semblance of form, revealing questionable aspects of his past, a further ode to American history. Just as Gatsby's roles as a criminal, a bootlegger, and, ultimately, an adulterer call into question his moral purity, so too must the US come to terms with the fact that much of its wealth came from the exploitation of others (Will 126). Perhaps this similarity is what causes scholar Lionel Trilling to remark that, in the end, "Gatsby . . . comes inevitably to stand for America itself" (17). Gatsby, like the America he represents, seeks to veil his past behind a wall of benevolence and prosperity. Through his character, Fitzgerald, in accordance with magical realist conventions, effectively challenges the notion of historical translucency, and places in its stead a more ambiguous vision of antiquity, a past that does not freely reveal its secrets and thus requires other means of representation than realism's purely mimetic conventions.

This distrust of historical transparency leads into one of the central issues within the novel, a commentary on the role of history in a modern world. This debate lies central to the

novel, characterized famously by East Egg— a symbol of old money and the past— and West Egg— a symbol of new money and the future. Throughout the novel, the theme of erasing one's history occurs repeatedly. Gatsby frequently voices his desire to return to how things were, making everything “just as if it were five years ago” (86). This obsession with undoing history, with rewinding the clock to cover up past mistakes, lies at the center of the novel. Indeed, Gatsby grows to become, as Edwin S. Fussell argues, an embodied vision of this dehistoricization, the “fictional counterpart of that American philistine maxim that ‘history is bunk’” (297). Gatsby manifests this desire in the now iconic scene in which he urges Daisy to confess that she never loved Tom, a request she cannot fulfill because she is bound to her historical reality: “‘Oh, you want too much!’ she cried to Gatsby. ‘I love you now – isn't that enough? I can't help what's past’” (103) This revelation proves the breaking point for Gatsby, who, for the first time in the novel, loses control of his passions and shatters, of all things, a clock, the very symbol of time itself. To Gatsby, the prospect of a romantic future is not enough; there must also be an unblemished past.

This commentary on the role of history, once again, serves to link the character of Jay Gatsby with his larger cultural context. He is, in essence, larger than life, an embodiment of “the whole of American civilization as it culminated in his own time” rather than simply a character in a novel (Fussell 297). Gatsby, like the United States, must struggle with the uncertain aspects of his past, striving for the ever-elusive “orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us” (141). The book closes with Nick's famous invocation of the past: “and so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (141) It is the final paragraph, Barbara Will argues, that elevates Gatsby to “mythic dimensions;” through the novel's final paragraphs, Gatsby attains a symbolic quality, “becoming an allegory for the course of the American nation and for the struggles and dreams of its citizens” (125). Gatsby is not just a character in the novel, but a symbol of American history, portions of which each — Gatsby and America — desire to rewrite.

Magic within The Great Gatsby

Of course, as Wendy Faris notes in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, none of these connections matter for the argument I am making if the novel is not, in fact, magical. In the following sections, I share my distinctly magical reading

of the text, arguing that, though subtle, the novel engages in a variety of magical conventions. This argument may, on the surface, seem surprising. Within the novel, there are no diamond mountains or people who age in reverse. The characters drive cars to get around, eat food, drink liquor, and live decadent but not strikingly impossible lives. They are familiar beings. And yet, at the same time, the story is not distinctly realistic either. Baz Lahrman's 2013 adaptation of the novel does some work to emphasize this unfamiliarity; in the film—as in the novel—the lights are a little too bright, the music too loud, and the characters too shiny. They are larger than life, unattainable. In a *New York Times* review of the movie, critic A.O. Scott notes the otherworldly nature of the film, writing that “all of [the film's characters] occupy a cartoon America that no living person has ever visited.” Here, too, readers find links with Alejo Carpentier's characterization of the “magical real,” a genre characterized by “an unexpected alteration. . . . an amplification of the scale and categories of reality” (76).

It is, perhaps, this “amplification of reality” that Fitzgerald refers to in his 1924 letter to Ludlow Fowler, where he writes that “[nostalgia] is the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory” (Mizener 192). My own magical reading of *The Great Gatsby* builds out of this idea, positing that in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald ushers readers into Nick Carraway's trance-like fever dream, a world in which larger-than-life characters inhabit their impossibly grandiose existences, existences that Fitzgerald melds together through a variety of increasingly bizarre and eccentric plot points⁸. These elements coalesce into a novel that is neither explicitly magical nor realistic; the novel exists, rather, at a nexus point between the two, simultaneously real enough that the New York it portrays remains familiar yet magical enough that this same New York also feels foreign and otherworldly, an “enchanted metropolitan twilight” as Nick Carraway terms it near the beginning of the novel (47).

⁸ Consider, for example, the fact that in a city that exceeded 5.5 million in the early 1920s, Daisy just happens to hit and kill the woman that her husband is having an affair with. In his *Vanity Fair* review of the novel, Christopher Hitchens characterizes the novel as abysmally implausible, noting that the novel asks readers to believe that “a man of Gatsby's supposed force and vitality just takes a house and waits for the girl to come, luckily discovering after brooding at length on a green light that the adored one's cousin lives next door! And one winces when Mr. Wilson's body is found near Gatsby's blood-streaked pool and ‘the holocaust was complete,’ because of the awful straining for effect and also because any definition of a holocaust would have had to take the life of Tom or at least Daisy.”

The magical elements of the setting of New York are compounded by the segregated nature each section of the city offers— East Egg from West Egg; Long Island from New York. To bridge these spaces, Fitzgerald creates, in effect, a portal out of the Queensboro bridge, a structure that transforms characters to the alternative realities and dimensions of New York. Carraway makes this connection explicitly, noting “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge. . . Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (55). It is Gatsby’s decision to cross the bridge that begins the novel’s climactic confrontation between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, and it is during the return trip that Daisy hits and kills Myrtle Wilson. On one side of the bridge exists the wild but carefully manicured and controlled lives of the Manhattan elite. On the other, the uncontrollable chaos of metropolitan reality takes over.

This sense of place, simultaneously mythical and real, provides *Gatsby* another connection with magical realism, a tradition that often draws its significance from place. Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus*⁹ (1982), for example, draws heavily on its setting in Chile’s capital, Santiago, while also offering its readers a portal in and out of the city — from the excitement and dangers of city life to the relatively slow pace of pastoral *Tres Marias*¹⁰. Jorge Luis Borges’ *La fundación mítica de Buenos Aires*¹¹ (1929) offers a similarly focused portrayal of temporality and location. Borges’ Buenos Aires is characterized by its “pasado ilusorio¹²,” it is a city “tan eterna como el agua y el aire¹³,” a city with no beginning or end (304). Yet, even as he builds the mythical elements of his city, Borges also draws attention to the city’s deep poverty, to the river “de sueñera y de barro¹⁴,” the ramshackled huts and weather-beaten boats (305). In this way, he mirrors Fitzgerald’s characterization of New York, a city whose energy and money are juxtaposed against the squalor of the valley of ashes, the “fantastic farm . . . where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys” (21). Critic Maureen Corrigan specifically links *The Great Gatsby* to both its grounding in and subjugation of space: “Gatsby, the visionary con man, is as much an improbability as New York City” she writes in *So We Read On*, adding that the city

⁹ *The House of the Spirits*

¹⁰ In *Cien años de soledad* (1967), Gabriel Garcia Marquez employs a similar technique, reconstructing the history of his own Colombian childhood town through the novel’s central setting, Macondo, a town that battles continuously between the carefree simplicity of its humble roots and the invasive temptation of industry and national politics.

¹¹ *The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires*

¹² Illusory past

¹³ As eternal as the water and the air

¹⁴ Sleepy and muddy

Gatsby inhabits is both “a wonder and a con,” a veneer of great possibility painted over the desolation symbolized by the valley of ashes (116).

This irreality is mirrored by the novel’s characters, particularly Gatsby and Daisy. Overshadowed now by the myriad of Gatsby Christ figure readings that surround the novel is the fact that Nick himself describes Gatsby with Messianic language, referring to him as “a son of God” who is “about His Father’s business” (77). Daisy, too, is characterized as the Holy Grail, the “king’s daughter,” the sweetness of her voice “tipp[ing] out . . . her warm human magic upon the air” (94, 84). Manuscript evidence shows that many of Fitzgerald’s final edits, done largely as he was finishing his draft in France, work to heighten these deific qualities in Gatsby. One of the most striking additions Fitzgerald made between his 1924 *Trimalchio* draft of Gatsby and his 1925 published drafts is the development of Gatsby mythical smile, the type of smile “with a quality of eternal reassurance in it,” the type of smile that “you may come across four or five times in life” (40). In the 1924 draft, Gatsby smiles just 4 times. In the published draft, Fitzgerald has him do so 10 times, with each drawing special attention to the ways that Gatsby’s smile impacts the world around him. For example in *Trimalchio*, Fitzgerald writes Gatsby’s first farewell to Nick as an insignificant and repetitive “good night” punctuated by Gatsby’s pet expression “old sport”: “‘Good night. . . . Good night, old sport. . . . Good night’” (*TR* 45). In his final draft, Fitzgerald adds several significant changes, the primary one being the inclusion of Gatsby’s smile: “‘Good night.’ [Gatsby] smiled—and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it so all the time. ‘Good night, old sport. . . . Good night’” (*GG* 44). Fitzgerald includes a similar change later in the text as he records Gatsby recounting the war experiences Fitzgerald never had:

Trimalchio (1924): “Little Montenegro! He lifted up the words and nodded at them with a faint smile” (*TR* 55).

The Great Gatsby (1925): “Little Montenegro! He lifted up the words and nodded at them—with his smile. The smile comprehended Montenegro’s troubled history and sympathized with the brave struggles of the Montenegrin people. It appreciated fully the chain of national circumstances which had elicited this tribute from Montenegro’s warm little heart. (*GG* 53)

Of note, Gatsby's "faint smile" in *Trimalchio* becomes, in the published version *The Great Gatsby*, the title character's mythical quality. Without his smile, Gatsby is a rich man who throws lavish parties. With it, he is transformed into something more, a deific figure who not only controls police forces but also notices details, his smile communicating to its recipient significance, appreciation, and clandestine comprehension¹⁵.

Fitzgerald punctuates the mythical elements of character and place by his careful manipulation of narrative language throughout the text. In her insightful lexical analysis of the novel, Xiangqi Liu breaks down Fitzgerald's unique use of grammar in *Gatsby*, noting that Fitzgerald's syntax choices create a "dreamy world" a place where "reality and illusion begin to blur" (665). Liu particularly focuses on Fitzgerald's manipulation of Nick Carraway's voice, noting that often Carraway speaks in "appositional phrases," the first part of the sentence providing plot relevant information while the second evokes "accumulations of romantic sensitivity — feelings or indefinite excitements" (665). As an example, Liu includes a lexicographic breakdown of the following section of Nick's internal dialogue: "For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (77). Conforming to Fitzgerald's established pattern, Liu notes that the beginning of the sentence establishes core content (what Liu terms a "time-adverbial") which is immediately followed by a philosophical musing, one that plays off of the connection between Daisy (whose maiden name is Fey) and fairies. In this way, Carraway "conveys a *magical destiny* to Gatsby's adventure," one that establishes both Gatsby and Daisy as mythical figures within the dream world that the text invokes (665, emphasis mine). Fitzgerald's lexicographical choices suggest textual tension, an authorial desire to coat the realistic elements of the text in a thick layer of irreality, to make magical what is normal.

¹⁵ To illustrate this final point, consider a third edit:

Trimalchio: "First he laughed politely, then he accepted [the compliment] for what it was worth and looked at me for a moment with an almost radiant smile" (TR 125).

Gatsby: "First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time" (GG 120).

This tendency towards amplification and exaggeration lies at the heart of my argument for a magical reading of *The Great Gatsby*. If, as Carpentier suggests, magical realism gains its power not through its displacement of materiality but through the ways that it purposefully amplifies reality, Fitzgerald engages in precisely this narrative act, doing so repeatedly through his manipulation of plot, image, character, and setting. The novel remains a mainstay in classrooms because of this duality, its ability to exist on multiple planes at once. Grounded in reality, the novel tells the tragic tale of a failed love story, one that ends with its protagonist floating dead in the pool behind his house. Amplified, it tells a bigger story, that of America's struggle to cope with and escape from its historical reality, of the reality and irreality of the American dream, of the contradictory message of the achievability of great wealth and the inaccessibility of the status roles reserved for the "right kind" of wealthy. Fundamentally, I agree with Edwin S. Fussell's insightful analysis of the novel, specifically his argument that the novel's ethos is derived from its thematic quest for "romantic wonder," one that is somehow simultaneously familiar enough to be approachable but "extensive enough to comprehend all American experience" (Fussell 294). To accomplish this incredibly ambitious aim, Fitzgerald manipulates form, creating through his text his own version of the Queensboro bridge, a portal between the real and the imagined, the accessible and the inaccessible.

Conclusion

Fitzgerald's canon (and here, specifically, *The Great Gatsby*) does not fit snugly within a particular literary genre classification. Certainly, Adorno would note that shoving Fitzgerald into this particular literary tradition creates yet more remainder and unresolved contradictions. I am both aware of this inadequacy and comfortable with its implications—I offer no attempt at meta-categorization and welcome the critique of scholars who see the inadequacies of my analysis, of which there are many. Still, I argue that there is value in reading Fitzgerald's work through the lens of magical realism. Primarily, such a reading demonstrates the perilous nature of genre and period categorization. More specific to Fitzgerald scholarship, recategorization approaches open the door for a variety of important conversations: Fitzgerald as an historian, Fitzgerald as an anti-historian, Fitzgerald as multicultural and transcontinental, American modernism as a conversation between artistic movements, particularly expressionism and post-expressionism. These examples remain but a few among many. Such a project also opens

doors for a variety of comparative readings of Fitzgerald's work alongside those of prominent magical realists — Garcia Marquez, Borges, Grass, Morrison, or Allende. Through these exercises a different (if not new) picture of the author and his writing emerges, one that morphs continuously as scholars acknowledge the complicated and dynamic nature narrative takes as it continues to expand, caroming off of an untold number of cultural and historical nodes.

Still, as much as this reading concerns itself with a reframing of *Gatsby*, I see it as something broader, a call for action for scholars to embrace an ethos of playfulness and *recategorization*. Here, I echo the sentiments of critic Rita Felski who, in *The Limits of Critique*, offers the following apt observation. Time, Felski argues, “is not a tidy sequence of partitioned units but a profusion of whirlpools and rapids, eddies and flows, as objects, ideas, images, and texts from different moments swirl, tumble, and collide in ever changing combinations and constellations” (158). Cross network connections, she argues “mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes,” forcing scholars to “acknowledge affinity and proximity as well as difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present” (159). Felski describes the scramble that results as “rich confusion” a “spillage across period barriers” that frees texts from the strictures of upper academia and returns texts to their rightful place, viewed not as mysteries to be solved or artifacts to be cataloged but rather as multitudinous sets of actor/network connectors, infinitely complex — unplumbable (159-160). In doing so, Felski argues, we return to the inherent playfulness of reading and the “inherent pleasure” embedded therein (160). Why is a reading of magical realism important? For all of the reasons listed above but also for one more: Because a magical reading of *The Great Gatsby* is fun.

So it is.

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