

# An Esoteric Reading of *The Great Gatsby*: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Allegory of the Gurdjieff Work

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## **Abstract**

A close reading of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) shows that not only is *Gatsby* an emblematic novel, but it is also closer to Carl Van Vechten's model for this genre, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923), than to other instances of the emblematic novel. The differences between the coded works of the ancient alchemists and the modernist, Van Vechten-Oragean novelists is that while the modernist texts never offer a transparent surface, they do contain a key. The novel is an assemblage of materials that must be decompiled to appreciate the complexity of what has been brought together. The characters are at certain points identified with specific Tarot cards. *The Great Gatsby* is a roman à clef. *The Great Gatsby* was written by laying out Tarot cards and alchemical emblems in the design that P. D. Ouspensky shows in *The Symbolism of the Tarot* (1976). The novel traces the traditional stages of the alchemical process using colors: black (*nigredo*), white (*albedo*), yellow (*citrinitas*), and red (*rubedo*), representing various stages of purification and transformation.

**Key Words:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Tarot, Alchemy, Emblematic Novel, Cabala Code, G. I. Gurdjieff

## **Introduction: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Carl Van Vechten**

It has been one hundred years since F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Some lists of the great American novels rank *The Great Gatsby* at the top. The *Gatsby* centennial revived interest in the theory that Jay Gatsby was a light-skinned African-American passing as a white man.<sup>1</sup> I had recently published *The Emblematic Novel: Esoteric Realism in the Harlem Renaissance and the Lost Generation* (2023), a study of modern American novels contemporaneous to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* that were esoteric texts authored by followers of A. R. Orage. For reasons that will be discussed below, I had not included Fitzgerald in the Oragean Modernist movement. Foundational to my writing of *The Emblematic Novel* was my determination

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<sup>1</sup> The studies that examine Jay Gatsby as passing for white are as follows: Carlyle Van Thompson, *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang /International Academic Publishers, 2004); Meredith Goldsmith, 'White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 49 no. 3, (2003), pp. 443-468; Janet Savage, *A Black Man in Whiteface* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); and Alonzo Vereen, 'A New Way to Read *Gatsby*', *The Atlantic*, 1 February (2023). At: [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/03/great-gatsby-book-fitzgerald-race-interpretation/672778/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/03/great-gatsby-book-fitzgerald-race-interpretation/672778/).

of the inaccuracy of the prevailing view of Carl Van Vechten as a minor and irrelevant writer. My argument was that Carl Van Vechten, the author of seven bestselling novels, had invented a new form of the novel that I called the emblematic novel. The emblematic novels expressed the Gurdjieff Work as taught in America by A. R. Orage. However, I had not connected Fitzgerald to Van Vechten and his social circle. There is little understanding of Van Vechten by literary critics. His social circle was the esoteric school that followed Orage, and much of his life was hidden. In accordance with the teachings of the Gurdjieff Work, Van Vechten played a role in his own life. Van Vechten maintained a fake diary and he did not drink alcohol.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Van Vechten's name appears on the membership list of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man (G.I. Gurdjieff's esoteric school) is routinely ignored.<sup>3</sup> Beyond my analysis of *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923), there are no serious studies of Van Vechten's extensive fiction. In accounts of the period, Fitzgerald and Van Vechten are routinely connected as participants in the Roaring Twenties nightlife.<sup>4</sup> However, there is never mention of the literary influence of Van Vechten on Fitzgerald. Van Vechten's literary influence on modern writers was profound and far-flung. Canonical writers who authored emblematic novels include Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937]), William Faulkner (*Pylon* [1935]), Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep* [1939]), Thornton Wilder (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* [1927]), James Agee (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [1941]), and Thomas Wolfe (*Look Homeward, Angel* [1929]). Having reached a better understanding of how esotericism was incorporated into the modern novel, when I again looked at Fitzgerald it was evident that *The Great Gatsby* was an emblematic novel.

A close reading of *The Great Gatsby* shows that not only is *Gatsby* an emblematic novel, but it is also closer to Van Vechten's model for this genre, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923), than to other instances of the emblematic novel. A comparison of similarities using digital stylometry (the Websty text similarity service) to measure semantic devices shows that *Gatsby* is more like *The Blind Bow-Boy* than Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Larsen's novel, dedicated to Van Vechten, is structured by the Tarot but not alchemy to the same degree as *The Blind Bow-Boy* as she largely omits alchemy. *The Great Gatsby* includes both alchemy and the Tarot. Following Van Vechten's lead, the most important emblems in *Gatsby* are three original emblems that Fitzgerald invented, the prominent oculist's sign, the face billboard, and a near-invisible emblem discussed below. This article looks past many of the novel's alchemical signs that do not rise to the level of the emblematic, such as Gatsby's gold shirt and silver tie, and the pearls that symbolize the attainment of wholeness but also illuminate Tom and Daisy's corrupt and hypocritical spiritual state.

Van Vechten's originating emblematic novel is derived from two sources, the Gothic cathedral —as elucidated by the master alchemist Fulcanelli in *Le Mystère Des Cathédrales*

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<sup>2</sup> Van Vechten's biographers quote his diary to establish his activities. The diary routinely has him nightclubbing all night and writing the next day during his production of seven novels. Van Vechten's novels are dense esoteric exercises and intricately coded. They could not have been written under those circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> David Seed, 'Party-Going in Fitzgerald and His Contemporaries', *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* (1 October 2015), pp. 163–183.

(1926)— and Ronald Firbank’s novels. Van Vechten’s emblematic novels are composed of the following elements: the cabala code; emblems drawn from Tarot cards, alchemical emblems, and Kabbalah; legominisms (esoteric subtexts identified by intentional errors); clues to breaking the code; and real people with invented names.<sup>5</sup>

### The Cabala Code in *The Great Gatsby*

The difference between the coded writings of the ancient alchemists and the modernist, Van Vechten-Oragean novels is that while the modernist texts never offer a transparent surface, they do contain a key, whereas the alchemical texts are indecipherable. Because of the use of the cabala code the emblematic novels are intricate puzzles. The cabala code disrupts the normal rules of reading, but it also seldom betrays its presence, so that conventional readers are blind to its existence even when they know the code is present. However, one consistent feature of the emblematic novels is that they provide the reader with a running subtext of clues that reveal the existence of the code. I am calling this commentary a key, because that is how the texts themselves refer to this feature. Another difficulty of the cabala code is that each author takes an individual approach to formulating the coded text. While all the authors use the same simple rules, because the code employs its tools randomly, the appearance of the code itself can vary widely from writer to writer. So, each time a reader encounters the code it requires a great deal of learning.

The cabala code can run in both directions, can skip about, and uses words phonetically. To read language written in such a code requires attention and imagination. The difficulties depend upon the degree to which the author fractures the conventional habits of reading. Since we read from left to right, linearly, contiguously, and using conventional spelling, a code which violates those conventions means that coded language is not recognized as being coded. One outstanding example of the intractability of the code is found in the most memorable motif in Fitzgerald’s lyrical prose. The light at the end of Daisy’s dock is mentioned four times in *Gatsby*. Here is the first occurrence: “Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.”<sup>6</sup> The cabala code is also called the green language and the language of the birds. In Van Vechten’s *The Blind Bow-Boy* each time green appears there is code in the text. However, Van Vechten allows the color to be the lone signifier. In the example from Fitzgerald above, “end of a dock” is used to manifest the word *code*. Not only is the word *code* spelled in reverse, but the e is also found at the beginning of “end.” Thus, Fitzgerald names the green code as he gives the word code (in code). This method of reinforcement is found throughout *The Great Gatsby*. While the reader may ask how anyone is supposed to read this way, a better question is how the novelist is able to write in this demanding style. This question will be addressed below.

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<sup>5</sup>Jon Woodson. *The Emblematic Novel: Esoteric Realism in the Harlem Renaissance and the Lost Generation* (Kindle Edition), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Global Publishers, Kindle Edition), p. 18.

The most troublesome aspect of the cabala code in *The Great Gatsby* is its variability. As in all emblematic novels there is a coded indication that the text is written using the cabala code. Anagrams of the word *cabala* (from emblematic novels by other writers: Calabrese, cable, Cadillac, Gabalis) are a consistent feature of emblematic novels. Fitzgerald anagrams *cabala* as the words capable, balance, peculiar, palace, celebrity and celebrated. Another technique used by Fitzgerald is to stretch a word through an entire paragraph by using multiple occurrences of the same letter. Since this is an extremely inefficient mode of communication, there is always a reinforcing clue provided in the paragraph. However, the form of the error correction is often abstruse, so that each paragraph is an individual puzzle that must be solved using indeterminate variations to the standard rules. One of the most demanding examples of the cabala in *Gatsby* is the joining of Gatsby and Daisy:

His heart beat faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her **perishable breath**, his **mind would never romp again** like the **mind** of **God**. **So** he waited, listening **for a moment longer to** the tuning-fork that **had** been struck upon **a star**. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.<sup>7</sup>

Fitzgerald parallels Van Vechten by this use of Greek myth. This paragraph alludes to an emblem published in Hieronymus Reussner's book of alchemical woodcuts, *Pandora* (1582).<sup>8</sup> The name Pandora is sounded in the above quoted paragraph as shown by the words in bold. The presentation is not straightforward, so that *Pandora* is delivered by an echo. The paragraph advises the reader to listen, so this is also a reading instruction. The secondary clue to the presence of the alchemical Pandora is the word "incarnation" that can be used to identify the alchemical emblem associated with Pandora. By being the first woman, Pandora becomes an alchemical symbol for incarnation into the physical world. The subtextual Pandora myth completely undermines the romantic scene described in the novel. By kissing Daisy, Gatsby has let loose a host of afflictions.

### What is *The Great Gatsby*?

Viewing Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an emblematic novel raises as many questions as it answers. The novel is an assemblage of occult materials that must be decompiled to appreciate the complexity of what Fitzgerald has assembled.

Tarot Cards: There are 78 cards in the Tarot deck, 22 of them trump cards. *The Great Gatsby* uses 34 Tarot cards, 15 of them trump cards. Alchemical Emblems: Fitzgerald uses 16 alchemical emblems. They are mostly derived from the same sets of emblems used by Van Vechten in *The Blind Bow-Boy*. The majority come from the *Splendor solis*.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 70

<sup>8</sup> The work includes 22 alchemical woodcuts. Fransiscus Epimetheus, *Pandora, That Is, The Noblest Gift of God* (Samuel Aparius, 1590).

Fine Art: Fitzgerald uses two paintings (a Boucher and an ancient Greek depiction of Theseus killing the Minotaur; and one photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, “The Terminal” (1892).<sup>9</sup> Van Vechten uses a Vermeer (the pearl relating to alchemy), and a Jean Metzinger (with a Greek mythological theme—Dionysus and Ariadne).

Another required feature of the emblematic novel is the presence of devices to alert the reader to the presence of the *cabala* code. These devices take many forms. In some emblematic novels a portion of the text instructs the reader how to assemble meaning through sight, sense and sound. As these reading lessons are disguised, they too usually go undetected. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick’s list of the attendees at Gatsby’s parties informs the reader that the novel is written in the *cabala* code. The passage in which Nick recounts the names of Gatsby’s guest is as follows:

From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches, and a man named Bunsen, whom I knew at Yale, and Doctor Webster Civet, who was drowned last summer up in Maine. And the Hornbeams and the Willie Voltaires, and a whole clan named Blackbuck, who always gathered in a corner and flipped up their noses like goats at whosoever came near. And the Ismays and the Chrysties (or rather Hubert Auerbach and Mr. Chrystie’s wife), and Edgar Beaver, whose hair, they say, turned cotton-white one winter afternoon for no good reason at all. Clarence Endive was from East Egg, as I remember. He came only once, in white knickerbockers, and had a fight with a bum named Etty in the garden. From farther out on the Island came the Cheadles and the O. R. P. Schraeders, and the Stonewall Jackson Abrams of Georgia, and the Fishguards and the Ripley Snells. Snell was there three days before he went to the penitentiary, so drunk out on the gravel drive that Mrs. Ulysses Swett’s automobile ran over his right hand. The Dancies came, too, and S. B. Whitebait, who was well over sixty, and Maurice A. Flink, and the Hammerheads, and Beluga the tobacco importer, and Beluga’s girls. From West Egg came the Poles and the Mulreadys and Cecil Roebuck and Cecil Schoen and Gulick the State senator and Newton Orchid, who controlled Films Par Excellence, and Eckhaust and Clyde Cohen and Don S. Schwartz (the son) and Arthur McCarty, all connected with the movies in one way or another. And the Catlips and the Bembergs and G. Earl Muldoon, brother to that Muldoon who afterward strangled his wife. Da Fontano the promoter came there, and Ed Legros and James B. (“Rot-Gut”) Ferret and the De Jongs and Ernest Lilly—they came to gamble, and when Ferret wandered into the garden it meant he was cleaned out and Associated Traction would have to fluctuate profitably next day. A man named Klipspringer was there so often that he became known as “the boarder”—I doubt if he had any other home. Of theatrical people there were Gus Waize and Horace O’Donavan and Lester Myer and George Duckweed and Francis Bull. Also from New York were the Chromes and the Backhyssons and the Dennickers and Russel Betty and the Corriganes and the Kellehers and the Dewars and the Scullys and S. W. Belcher and the Smirkes and the young Quinns, divorced now, and Henry L. Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square. Benny McClenahan arrived always with four girls. They were never quite the same

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, ‘The Terminal’ (1911 [1893]), *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. At: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/270032>.

ones in physical person, but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably seemed they had been there before. I have forgotten their names—Jaqueline, I think, or else Consuela, or Gloria or Judy or June, and their last names were either the melodious names of flowers and months or the sterner ones of the great American capitalists whose cousins, if pressed, they would confess themselves to be.

In addition to all these I can remember that Faustina O'Brien came there at least once and the Baedeker girls and young Brewer, who had his nose shot off in the war, and Mr. Albrucksburger and Miss Haag, his fiancée, and Ardita Fitz-Peters and Mr. P. Jewett, once head of the American Legion, and Miss Claudia Hip, with a man reputed to be her chauffeur, and a prince of something, whom we called Duke, and whose name, if I ever knew it, I have forgotten.<sup>10</sup>

The names in the above list are not of a piece. The names are invested in various forms of satirical wordplay (name-calling, exaggeration, parody, and non sequitur) but only some of them conform to the rules of the cabala code. The most transparent name on the extensive list is Ripley Snells. This name is to be deciphered as *smells ripe*. The words are read in the reverse order, and some letters must be substituted, others are ignored, and the only reason sense can be made of the original form is because smells ripe is a cliché. The cabala asks the reader to perform these gymnastics with words that are unfamiliar: this is the source of the difficulty of reading the green language of alchemy. Another name in the same pattern is Lester Myer, which says *more or less*. Edgar Beaver follows this pattern. Fitzgerald's examples imply the rules of the code.

All the names of people in the novel take the encoded form that was demonstrated above. An annotated list of the deciphered names follows. Nick Carraway. Fitzgerald's narrator continues to remain controversial among analysts of the novel. This is because of the contradictions introduced by this crucial focalizer. The name Nick stands on its own and does not need to be deciphered. Carraway uses the cabala code to say *awake*. It is within the rules of the cabala to shift the position of the c, to make it a k, and to ignore the remaining letters. These necessities allow for the impenetrability of the coded language, as conventional reading disallows these procedures. Awakening is a determining concept to attach to Nick and to the novel, as it is the central impetus of the Gurdjieff Work that the normal state of man is a waking sleep. Ouspensky's summation of the Work states:

But of course most sleeping people will say that they have an aim and that they are going somewhere. The realization of the fact that he has no aim and that he is not going anywhere is the first sign of the approaching awakening of a man or of awakening becoming really possible for him. Awakening begins when a man realizes that he is going nowhere and does not know where to go.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>11</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of a Lost Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 159.

It is no exaggeration to say that the above quotation fully expresses the submerged esoteric theme of *The Great Gatsby*. Gurdjieff's 1,200-page novel *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson or An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (1950) uses the framing device of the musings of an extraterrestrial known as Beelzebub (who shares a name with the demon of the same name) to his grandson Hassein, as they travel through space towards Beelzebub's home planet, Karatas, on the spaceship *Karnak*. Beelzebub recounts his adventures and travails amongst the "three-brained beings" (humans) of the planet Earth. Beelzebub details the history, customs and psychology of humanity and relates the esoteric theory behind the workings of the universe. One of the more common colloquial names for the Devil is Old Nick. Given that the narrator is given the name Nick, we can see that Nick Carraway exists in some relationship to the descent of Beelzebub to Earth. If Nick Carraway is the fully awakened extraterrestrial Beelzebub, the narrative takes on a complex esoteric meaning. For instance, Nick begins by saying that he does not judge, a statement that flies in the face of the title of Gurdjieff's novel, *An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*.

Nick's list of Gatsby's guests concludes with a tongue-in-cheek disclosure of his identity as Beelzebub. Nick writes that one guest was "a prince of something, whom we called Duke, and whose name, if I ever knew it, I have forgotten."<sup>12</sup> The something Nick leaves unsaid is the prince of darkness, and Satan is also known as the Great Duke. In a connected revelation, Nick says that his family descends from the Dukes of Buccleuch,<sup>13</sup> again referring to the Great Duke. While Buccleuch is an orthographic departure from Beelzebub, the word descended suggests the six descents that Beelzebub made to Earth. Nick Carraway has not forgotten his own name, Beelzebub, and now we have a measure of his absolute untrustworthiness as a narrator.

Jay Gatsby. Jay Gatsby's name at birth was James Gatz. His father called him Jimmy when he came to Gatsby's funeral. As Jimmy Gatz climbed aboard the yacht Tuolomee, he became Jay Gatsby. The yacht's name used by Fitzgerald is an incorrect spelling of Tuolumee. The introduction of this mistake (also known as a conscious discrepancy or lawful inexactitude), identifies the existence of an esoteric content. When Tuolumee is read in reverse and sounded phonetically, it says *emulate*. It has been well established that Gatsby wished to join the upper class, and that he used his employment with Dan Cody to learn the ways of the wealthy. Emulate is used to make a distinction with imitation. The initiate must find his own way.

Reading Jay Gatsby through the cabala code's phonetic variations produces *gate*. The whole name Jay Gatsby is *strait gate*. This brings us to Matthew 7:13-14 (King James Version):

<sup>13</sup> Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

<sup>14</sup> Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> King James Bible Online. At: <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>.

The relevance of the strait gate is established when Gatsby's father shows Nick the self-improvement schedule that Gatsby wrote on the blank pages of *Hopalong Cassidy*. The mystery of introducing a wild west adventure story into *Gatsby* is countered by recollecting that the cowboy hero had a wooden leg and a strong moral compass. The wooden leg marks the indirect insertion of a legominism, a text within the main text in which fundamental concepts in the Fourth Way (the Gurdjieff Work) are presented. The standard method for introducing a legominism in Van Vechten's novels was to diffuse the word *legominism* through separated units: "donned...dressing-gown...legs...swimming."<sup>15</sup> Van Vechten also supported the above clue with the words "green" and "writing," a reference to the green language, another name for the cabala. Fitzgerald chose to only use the word leg. In this case, the leg appears indirectly, which accounts for the obscurity of the role of the esoteric in *The Great Gatsby*. Since the preliminary stage of the Work is self-observation, we may think of Gatsby's youthful regimen as an approximation of the course of self-observation taught by A. R. Orage.

Daisy Fay. We can best understand Daisy Fay through the esoteric doctrine of the Law of Three, one of Gurdjieff's fundamental teachings:

The Law of Three is a law of creation. Creation of the human life. The law states that for anything to be created or an event to materialize three forces must be present. An active force (father), a passive force (son), and then a neutral force (holy-spirit). All three must be present and are equally important for the phenomenon to arise. A simple example would be boy meets girl, the active force, boy wants the girl, but the girl doesn't want the boy because he is out of shape and overweight, the passive force. The boy decides to start eating better and exercising, the neutral force, to get in shape and impress the girl. Boy and girl get married and live happily ever after, the outcome or manifestation of the three forces.<sup>16</sup>

The example above approximates the plot of *The Great Gatsby*. Instead of diet and exercise, the novel applies Gatsby's mansion, parties, and wealth as the neutral force, though the rejection is complicated by the fact that it is all in Gatsby's head. The term appearing above in connection with the girl is passive. Daisy's name is code for *easy*. Daisy is the passive force, she is easy.

Tom Buchanan. Tom Buchanan is also best understood through the Law of Three. Fitzgerald has manifested the denying aspect of the second force through Tom. Tom Buchanan is code for *you can not*. It goes without saying that ordinarily we do not read Tom as the word *not*, which is why the cabala functions so well as code. Tom's role in the narrative is to oppose nearly everything that the action introduces. Later he is directly in opposition to Gatsby. It is Tom who provides the misleading information that incites Gatsby's murder by George Wilson.

Myrtle Wilson. Myrtle is code for *murder*. Myrtle is murdered by Daisy Buchanan using Gatsby's car. This literal treatment of names is common in many other Oragean Modernist novels,

<sup>15</sup> Carl Van Vechten, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (New York: Knopf, 1923), p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Rich Decker, 'What Is the Law of Three?', *Medium*, 1 October (2017). At: <https://medium.com/@rich.decker2010/what-is-the-law-of-three-and-how-does-it-apply-in-your-life-86ac61ca4243>.

where characters are given descriptive, coded names. Where Myrtle evokes an esoteric concept is through her fascination with a dog. On an impulse, Myrtle purchases a puppy, which she ignores unless to impulsively cover it with kisses. The dog is met in the Gurdjieff Work through the warning to pupils that “if they did not perfect themselves, they will die like dogs.”<sup>17</sup>

George Wilson. George Wilson’s name says *no will*. According to Nick Carraway, “He was a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome.”<sup>18</sup> Will is one of the ideas in the Work that powerfully informs Fitzgerald’s novel, since what we are shown are the various outcomes of the exercise of will. Ouspensky states that

What happens or may happen to us may depend upon three causes: upon accident, upon fate, or upon our own will. Such as we are, we are almost wholly dependent upon accident. We can have no fate in the real sense of the word any more than we can have will. If we had will, then through this alone we should know the future, because we should then make our future, and make it such as we want it to be. If we had fate, we could also know the future, because fate corresponds to type. If the type is known, then its fate can be known, that is, both the past and the future. But accidents cannot be foreseen. Today a man is one, tomorrow he is different: today one thing happens to him, tomorrow another.”<sup>19</sup>

We can abstract from the above quotation that what we see in *Gatsby* is the determination to overcome accidents and to make his future what he wants it to be.

Meyer Wolfsheim. The leader of the criminal gang through which *Gatsby* made his money is the embodiment of Gurdjieff in the novel. Gurdjieff is always depicted negatively by A. R. Orage’s followers. The repudiation of Gurdjieff is signaled in *The Great Gatsby* by the repeated mention of Wolfsheim’s protruding nose hair: “A small, flat-nosed Jew raised his large head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril. After a moment I discovered his tiny eyes in the half-darkness.”<sup>20</sup> This usage is in contradistinction to Gurdjieff’s flourishing moustache which never goes unremarked in any account of the figure. Meyer Wolfsheim’s name can be deciphered as *follow me*, a phrase inextricably linked to Jesus. As the followers of Orage embraced Gurdjieff’s teaching while divorcing themselves completely from Gurdjieff the man, we must assume that Wolfsheim takes the place of a false messiah, and he must be rejected. The only action that Wolfsheim takes is to refuse to attend *Gatsby*’s funeral, thus we witness his depravity. Nick Carraway finds Wolfsheim through locating the Swastika Holding Company. We can read Swastika Holding Company superficially as *waste land*. In other words, Gurdjieff the man, is a dead end. However, there is a more likely reading of Swastika Holding Company that will not be provided. Carl Van Vechten, a contributor to the composition of *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Sophia Wellbeloved, ‘A Note on the Dog Gurdjieff Buried’, *Gurdjieff Books Word Press*, 18 February (2011). At: <https://gurdjieffbooks.wordpress.com/sophia-wellbeloveds-gurdjieff-academic-research-page/a-note-on-the-dog-gurdejiff-buried/>.

<sup>18</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 100-101

<sup>20</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 44.

*Great Gatsby*, indulged in creating homoerotic pornography.<sup>21</sup> Several instances of this tendency appear in Fitzgerald's novel, and this is the most inappropriate example.<sup>22</sup>

Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. Though he is not a living character, Doctor T. J. Eckleburg is a major contributor to the meaning of the text. The oculist's sign is the most tangible emblem in the text of the novel, as distinct from the paratextual emblem on the cover. The other emblems are present only through allusions, such as when at the opening of the novel Nick Carraway brings in his "[inclination]to reserve all judgements,"<sup>23</sup> which brings in the Judgement Tarot card. The name Doctor T. J. Eckleburg appears on a sign that dominates the skyline of the valley of ashes. The valley of ashes is as important a setting as Gatsby's mansion. Much of the action of the novel seesaws between the vitalic chaos of Gatsby's mansion and the sterility of the valley of ashes. However, the valley of ashes would lack most of its significance were the oculist's sign not present:

But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.<sup>24</sup>

Gurdjieff had a sallow complexion, and there is hardly a work of fiction by the Oragean Modernist school where his representations are not associated with yellow. The yellow spectacles brand the doctor as a depiction of Gurdjieff. This is seconded using the word oculist, for it is a suggestion of *occultist*, a word often applied to Gurdjieff and made mandatory by the *cabala* code. The doctor's name itself is a fragmentary inscription of Gurdjieff's name. Some of the requisite letters are present and must be relocated to come close to Gurdjieff. The T is used to supply the long E sound that is alternatively used to pronounce his name if the speaker desires a more authentically Russian delivery. Thus, we have the name Gurdjieff from gur [urg] D [Doctor] J. E [Eckleburg]. The F is lacking, which does not contradict the usages of the *cabala* code. As an added clue, the *leb* taken as *bel* and combined with E is a suggestion of Beelzebub. The enormous eyes looking through yellow spectacles suggests the remote gaze of Beelzebub who for thousands of years observed humanity through an alien version of a telescope:

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<sup>21</sup> Jordan Browne, *Binding the Archive: The Scrapbooks of Carl Van Vechten* (Masters Thesis: Ryerson University, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Carl Van Vechten makes his appearance in *Gatsby* as "Mr. Klipspringer, the "boarder... a dishevelled man in pyjamas [who] was doing liver exercises on the floor." The phrase is in code and says *sex orgy*. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 19.

“Yes, I must note that by the time to which my tale refers, my first *Teskooano* had already been set up in the observatory which I had constructed on the planet Mars and I was just then devoting myself entirely to the further organization and development of this observatory of mine, for the more detailed observation of the remote concentrations of our great Universe and of the planets of this solar system.

“Among the objects of my observations, then, was also this planet Earth.”<sup>25</sup>

The identification of the oculist with Gurdjieff’s fictional Beelzebub is sustained by the gigantic retinas on the sign, which give the coded word *Satan*. The advertisement is an indication of the importance of occultism to the understanding of the novel while also participating crucially in the action. When George Wilson, devastated by his wife’s death, proclaims that the eyes belong to God, the neighbor who is nursing him declares that it is only an advertisement. The valley of ashes over which the advertisement looms takes its occult meaning from alchemy, for ashes are connected to the processes of transformation and rebirth. The reborn phoenix rises from ashes. The Gurdjieff Work is often said to be a form of alchemy: “besides ordinary chemistry there exists another, a special chemistry, or alchemy if you like, which studies matter taking into consideration its cosmic properties.”<sup>26</sup> The oculist’s sign is in the final analysis a conscious discrepancy, for it stands in place of an alchemical emblem with a cosmic meaning. The oculist/occult emblem bears not two eyes but one floating eye, the All-Seeing Eye.



Figure 1. Jacob Bohme, “The longer the better.”

<sup>25</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson or An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (Holy Books: Digital Edition), p. 90. At: <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Beelzebubs-Tales-to-His-Grandson-by-G-I-Gurdjieff.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 91.

Jordan Baker. Jordan Baker is code for *danger/wreck*. Nick is alarmed by her nonchalant, irresponsible driving. Jordan replies that it takes two to make an accident.<sup>27</sup> However, Jordan Baker is only dangerous to Nick Carraway who might have married her. Nick's retreat from Jordan sets up one of the most pervasive ambiguities in the interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*.

Mr. McKee. On the surface, the photographer Mr. McKee provides the word *meek*:

Mr. McKee was a pale, feminine man from the flat below. He had just shaved, for there was a white spot of lather on his cheekbone, and he was most respectful in his greeting to everyone in the room. He informed me that he was in the "artistic game," and I gathered later that he was a photographer and had made the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson's mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall. His wife was shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible. She told me with pride that her husband had photographed her a hundred and twenty-seven times since they had been married.<sup>28</sup>

From the above quotation, we can see that the McKees are satirical portraits of Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. Stieglitz set himself up as a spiritual teacher rivaling Gurdjieff, and Fitzgerald has demoted him through satire. In a second scene Nick is shown intervening:

It was nine o'clock—almost immediately afterward I looked at my watch and found it was ten. Mr. McKee was asleep on a chair with his fists clenched in his lap, like a photograph of a man of action. Taking out my handkerchief I wiped from his cheek the spot of dried lather that had worried me all the afternoon.<sup>29</sup>

This seemingly irrelevant episode hides one of the most consequential meanings in the novel. Handkerchief is the only word in the English language which holds the correct phonetic pronunciation of Gurdjieff's name (gord-chief), which in English is corrupted to gird-chaff. The lather is the word *heal* in code. The moves that Nick carries out serve as an allegorical pantomime of a foundational cosmic event.

In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* which Gurdjieff introduced a theme that runs as a litany through the entire book the idea of "Kundabuffer." Kundabuffer was an organ implanted by "archangels" in man "at the base of the spinal column," whose effect was to make them perceive reality upside-down and to experience "pleasure and enjoyment." The archangels feared that if people "prematurely" understood their slavery to cosmic purposes and that the reason for their existence was that when they die they were meant to be "food for the moon," they might "make a great deal of trouble" and even "end their existence." Kundabuffer was later removed by other archangels, but its "consequences" had become crystallized in Man and are the chief cause why life on earth is so full of evil.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Hodges, 'Kundabuffer'. At: <https://www.richardhodges.com/Kundabuffer4>

Gatsby's parties are examples of the ongoing effect of the remains of the buffers that hypnotize the human race. McKee's lather dots his face because he cannot observe himself. Nick's action removes the buffers to self-observation. While it is counterintuitive for Nick-Gurdjieff-Beelzebub to remove the lather so that McKee can see himself, were Nick to simply show McKee the spot of lather on his face, McKee would not have acted. This is why the text states that even though McKee is asleep he is in the pose of a man of action. Thus, what Nick does is to supply McKee with the possibility to actively self-observe so that he can awaken.

Mrs. Sigourney Howard. *Journey/coward*. Daisy uses this person's house for refuge after the murder.

Dan Cody. Dan Cody says *in code*.

Ella Kaye. Ella Kaye is, from the esoteric perspective, the most important name in the novel. The name renders the word *key*. The name Madame de Maintenon follows in the same sentence, implying the name is a key. The chateau where Gurdjieff established the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man was the Prieuré near Avon in the Forest of Fontainebleau. The property had originally been a monastic priory of which only a few stones were left in the ground. The Chateau had been built in Louis XV's time and there every Sunday Mme. de Maintenon went to Mass. It ceased to be a monastery at the time of the French Revolution but kept its name. This coded, indirect allusion is as close as Fitzgerald comes in *The Great Gatsby* to identifying the alignment of his novel with the Gurdjieff Work. However, it is a substantial indication.

Mavro Michaelis. Mavro means black in Greek and suggests a person of poor character. Michaelis is an allusion to the suit of cups in the Tarot through the decoded word *chalice* from Michaelis. At the same time, the cook—in contrast to George Wilson—seems to uphold the reality principle:

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night. "God sees everything," repeated Wilson. "That's an advertisement," Michaelis assured him. Something made him turn away from the window and look back into the room. But Wilson stood there a long time, his face close to the window pane, nodding into the twilight.<sup>31</sup>

The Tarot card that corresponds to the scene described in the novel is the Five of Cups.

"The Five of Cups card portrays a figure cloaked in black, head bowed in sorrow, set against a desolate landscape. Before him, three spilled cups stand, their contents flowing onto the ground."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Edward Waite, *The Rider Tarot Deck [Instructions]* (Stamford, CT: U.S. Games Systems, Inc., 1971), pp. 29-30.



Figure 2. The Five of Cups

It is a card of loss. The name Mavros, black, is explained by the black cloak.

### The Tarot Cards as Emblems

*The Great Gatsby* uses 34 of the 78 Tarot cards. Carl Van Vechten's *The Blind Bow-Boy* employs 12 Tarot cards. The cards are used by both authors to mark the passage of their initiate-protagonists on their spiritual journeys. Fitzgerald departs from Van Vechten in that he uses some of the cards twice, once using the upright divination and once using the reversed divination. In *The Great Gatsby* the meanings of the divinations bear close parallels to what happens in the novel more so than in *The Blind Bow-Boy*. When a wheel comes off a car at the end of one of Gatsby's parties the card indicated is the Wheel of Fortune, and when the drunken driver says "Put her in reverse," the reversed divination is indicated.<sup>33</sup> A more salient innovation in Fitzgerald's use of the Tarot is that he allows the Tarot to emerge into the surface text with Gatsby's White Card.<sup>34</sup> While in the story the White Card seems to function as a business card that connects Gatsby to a local police commissioner, the White Card expressly belongs to the Tarot deck. The original classic Tarot deck consisted of 78 images. Some manufacturers added a White Card which became very significant for the interpretation of the Tarot spread. This card is called the card of the Absolute and of the

<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 44.

Higher Powers. The White Card has two functions in *Gatsby*: it links Gatsby to the Absolute, while also declaring the presence of the Tarot in the novel.

A more significant appearance of the Tarot takes place in the subtext where it is nearly invisible. However, by extracting what is said about the Tarot in this passage, vital information about the composition of the novel can be gained. When Nick discovers that Gatsby's domestic help has been replaced because of Daisy, he says "So the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes."<sup>35</sup> What shifts this passage into something beyond cliché is that the words offer P. D. Ouspensky's name in code: *house...disapproval...in...eyes*. The code in this instance is particularly demanding, for the K in the name is shifted back to "caravansary" and "card." Ouspensky's "card house" is the design in his essay *The Symbolism of the Tarot*, where he presents the idea for an arrangement of the entire pack of Tarot cards:

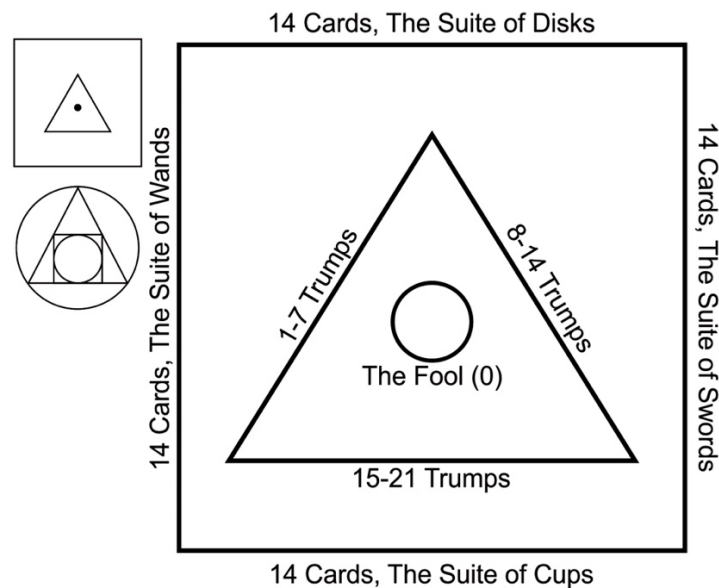


Figure 3. Ouspensky, *The Symbolism of the Tarot*

Now, if we imagine twenty-one cards disposed in the shape of a triangle, seven cards on each side, a point in the centre of the triangle represented by the zero card, and a square round the triangle (the square consisting of fifty-six cards, fourteen on each side), we shall have a representation of the relation between God, Man and the Universe, or the relation between the world of ideas, the consciousness of man and the physical world.

The triangle is God (the Trinity) or the world of ideas, or the noumenal world. The point is man's soul. The square is the visible, physical or phenomenal world. Potentially, the point is equal to the square, which means that all the visible world is contained in man's

<sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 71.

consciousness, is created in man's soul. And the soul itself is a point having no dimension in the world of the spirit, symbolized by the triangle. It is clear that such an idea could not have originated with ignorant people and clear also that the Tarot is something more than a pack of playing or fortune-telling cards.<sup>36</sup>

A caravansary is an inn with a courtyard. We must take into consideration that Fitzgerald says, “whole caravansary.” Thus, the “whole caravansary” corresponds to the figure that is a design for the Tarot cards to be spread as an expression of totality, just as Ouspensky outlines. Ouspensky’s design is not without an origin and may be seen in Basil Valentine’s alchemical text, *Twelve Keys*. Fitzgerald has brought Ouspensky in to establish a link between the Tarot cards and alchemy. Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* by laying out Tarot cards and alchemical emblems in the design that Ouspensky shows in *The Symbolism of the Tarot*. How exactly this was accomplished remains a mystery. Using only Tarot cards Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote her novel, *The Sojourner* (1953), in strict compliance with Ouspensky’s divinatory scheme.<sup>37</sup> It was impossible for Fitzgerald to follow Ouspensky’s spread of the Tarot, as once he introduced alchemical emblems to his novel, there was no pre-existing assembly of suits and ranks to follow as there is with the deck of Tarot cards. It seems likely that the outline for the novel came first, and the esoteric imagery was later applied to the episodes in the text. However, this assertion is speculative.

The characters are at certain points identified with specific Tarot cards. Some of the descriptions in the text are drawn from the imagery on the cards. However, Fitzgerald was not as dependent on the cards for imagery as Van Vechten, who adhered minutely to the scenes on the cards. *Gatsby* begins with Nick as Judgement. Nick’s association with the Judgment card is ironic, in that he states that he does not judge:

In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men.<sup>38</sup>

Gatsby’s house is The Tower. “The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby’s mansion.”<sup>39</sup> Tom Buchanan is The Fool. Daisy is the Fool’s Journey and must travers the 22 cards of the Major Arcana. George Wilson is The Hierophant. Gatsby’s father

<sup>36</sup> P. D. Ouspensky. *The Symbolism of the Tarot* (1913). At: <https://sacred-texts.com/tarot/sot/index.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Jon Woodson, ““Tear down the log cabin”: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s *The Sojourner* as a High Modernist Novel Based on the Tarot and Written in Collaboration with Zora Neal Hurston”, *Academia* (2014). At: [https://www.academia.edu/6640476/\\_Tear\\_down\\_the\\_log\\_cabin\\_Marjorie\\_Kinnan\\_Rawlings\\_s\\_The\\_Sojourner\\_as\\_a\\_High\\_Modernist\\_Novel\\_Based\\_on\\_the\\_Tarot\\_and\\_Written\\_in\\_Collaboration\\_with\\_Zora\\_Neal\\_Hurston](https://www.academia.edu/6640476/_Tear_down_the_log_cabin_Marjorie_Kinnan_Rawlings_s_The_Sojourner_as_a_High_Modernist_Novel_Based_on_the_Tarot_and_Written_in_Collaboration_with_Zora_Neal_Hurston).

<sup>38</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 9.

is The Hermit. At one point Fitzgerald equates Gatsby and Daisy to The Lovers trump card. This significant Tarot card is called out in a coded paragraph:

As I watched him he adjusted himself a little, visibly. His hand took hold of hers, and as she said something low in his ear he turned toward her with a rush of emotion. I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn't be over-dreamed—that voice was a deathless song.<sup>40</sup>

The pattern of identifying the surface action with Tarot cards using the *cabala* code and secondary clues is followed throughout the entire novel. The impression is that every paragraph in the novel sustains hidden code or esoteric wordplay.

### Alchemical Emblems

Fitzgerald uses eighteen alchemical emblems in *Gatsby*. Van Vechten has nineteen in *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Fitzgerald shares Van Vechten's sources, with most of the images coming from the *Splendor solis*. In both novels the alchemical emblems correspond to the spiritual development of the protagonist. The most developed alchemical motif in *Gatsby* is that of Daisy and washing. Following the chaos or *massa confusa* of the *nigredo* stage, the alchemist undertakes a purification in albedo, which is literally referred to as *ablutio* – the washing away of impurities. Gatsby does not use his pool until the death scene. This cleansing phase is concerned with bringing light and clarity to the *prima materia* (the First Matter). When Daisy arrives for the initial tryst with Gatsby at Nick's house, she is soaking wet.<sup>41</sup> Daisy later wants five bathtubs for cold baths in the city. However, she does not bathe in the hotel and frivolously jokes that they should send out for an axe to let in more cool air. Washing brings in one of the emblems from *Splendor solis* that shows a man bathing in a courtyard.

The alchemical emblems used by Fitzgerald are as follows:

Jakob Boehme, All-Seeing Eye  
Absolute Rose, Alchemical Rose  
*Monas Hieroglyphica*, John Dee  
*Splendor Solis*, three lions  
*Splendor Solis*, lunar queen, solar king  
*Pretiosissimum Donum Dei*, George Aurach, 1475 (albedo)  
Distillation (alchemical stove)  
Coagulation (alchemy)  
Washing (alchemy, *ablutio*, *Splendor Solis*, women washing clothes)  
Wound Man

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<sup>40</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 176.

<sup>41</sup> "A damp streak of hair lay like a dash of blue paint across her cheek, and her hand was wet with glistening drops as I took it to help her from the car," Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 54.

*Splendor Solis*, red king  
 Ladder, Fludd  
*Aurora Consurgens*, nursing old men  
 “Pandora,” Reussner, 1582  
 Eleazar, King and snake  
*Splendor Solis*, bath  
*Splendor Solis*, lunar queen, solar king (2)  
 All-Seeing Eye  
 “The Sick Rose,” William Blake

The alchemical emblems in *The Great Gatsby* are accounted for by a complex system of textural clues that are made even more difficult to penetrate by the *cabala* code. For instance, William Blake’s poem and drawing, “The Sick Rose” comes into the narrative as Gatsby returns home after Myrtle has been killed, “as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is.”<sup>42</sup> The entire paragraph spells Blake’s name but uses C for K. “[W]arm” is worm in the way of a helpful clue. Fitzgerald’s employment of alchemical emblems is specified by various means in the text. It is a consistent practice that the emblems are both named and symbolized simultaneously as was shown above in the case of Blake’s rose.

### Original Emblems

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the emblematic novels is the degree to which they are not recognized for what they are. Carl Van Vechten’s *The Blind Bow-Boy* was originally published with a distinctive frontispiece by George Locher. This indispensable artwork was not included in the recent republication of the novel. Instead, the cover shows Van Vechten in a portrait by Florine Stettheimer in support of the prevailing camp interpretation of his novel. The Locher frontispiece may usefully be thought of as a crucially important original alchemical emblem, for lacking this paratext Van Vechten’s novel is nearly indecipherable. Locher’s illustration is carried out in a green line drawing, alluding to the green language, another name for the *cabala* code. The drawing depicts a garden in which a fountain dominates the space. The fountain sits in a D-shaped pool of water, which alludes to the occultist John Dee. John Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad makes an appearance in *Gatsby*, where the paragraph encodes the name Dee and registers the hieroglyph that resembles a cartoon smile. Thus, Fitzgerald plays off Dee’s actual symbol against Van Vechten’s inauthentic and less imaginative presentation.<sup>43</sup>

At the center of Locher’s fountain are two sculptural figures, a reclining nude woman and a winged nude man with a bow. The man is wearing a blindfold, and his head is on backwards. We are given enough clues by the title of the novel and the sculptural figures to recognize that this is a depiction of the mythic story of Cupid and Psyche. However, it was Psyche who wore the blindfold in the myth, and Cupid did not have a backwards head. There are many other inclusions

<sup>42</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 100.

<sup>43</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 33.

in the drawing that lead one into other avenues of allusion. The mistakes in the drawing come under the heading of what Gurdjieff called “lawful inexactitudes,” one of the attributes of “objective” works of art.<sup>44</sup> These intentional departures from reality are used in esoteric texts to indicate the esoteric nature of the exposition. When one follows up the clues in the rest of the Locher drawing a great deal of information is acquired. What we want to do now that we are aware of the intertextual byplay between the two authors using emblems is to look at Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* with the Locher frontispiece in mind.



Figure 4. John Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad.

The first of the two original emblems that Fitzgerald inserted into his novel is the advertisement for an oculist in the valley of ashes. What T. J. Eckleburg’s sign has in common with Van Vechten’s paratextual emblem is the focus on vision. Van Vechten’s Cupid is blindfolded, while the images on both of Fitzgerald’s signs have to do with eyes, one showing a pair of gigantic eyes peering through lenses, the second the billboard that Nick and Jordan pass in the city showing a disembodied woman’s face. A variation of the billboard emblem showing the woman’s face designed by Francis Cugat was used on the dustjacket of the novel and on the custom half morocco clamshell boxes that housed deluxe editions. On the dustjacket, the billboard sign has been reduced to mascaraed eyes and ruby lips that float above the bright lights of the city, so that it is no longer a billboard advertisement. What is significant in all of this is that Fitzgerald has derived from Van Vechten the idea of creating an original emblem associated with the theme of vision. Fitzgerald’s

<sup>44</sup> Anna Challenger, ‘Gurdjieff’s Theory of Art’, *Gurdjieff’s Theory of Art*. At: <https://americanwritersmuseum.org/stories-behind-classic-book-covers-the-great-gatsby>.

cover is derived from a specific alchemical emblem, a 17<sup>th</sup> century woodcut that shows one eye floating above a settlement.<sup>45</sup>

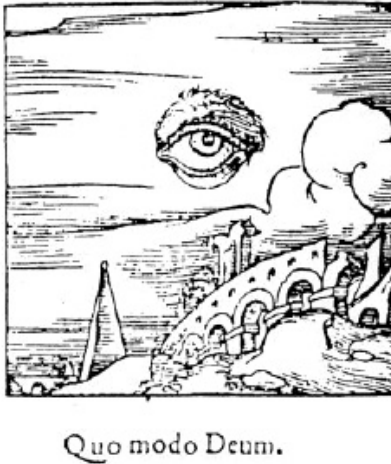


Figure 5. All-Seeing Eye, Alchemical Woodcut.

A comparison of the Cugat sketch of the face in profile to the alchemical all-seeing eye woodcut shows a striking resemblance. Cugat even carries over to his sketch the woodcut's tower and the rounded shape of the arches in the walls.

On the surface, neither of Fitzgerald's emblems appear to be connected to myth in the same way as Van Vechten's Cupid and Psyche emblem. However, just as the Cupid wears the misplaced blindfold, the lawful inexactitude in *Gatsby* is a visual error (or conscious discrepancy). While both signs bear two eyes peering through spectacles due to the need for correction, what pertains to alchemy is the all-seeing eye. Where there are two corrected eyes, there should properly be one all-seeing eye. This idea has been made yet more distant on the cover of the book where the presence of lips goes even further toward the depiction of a face. The argument can even be made that just as Van Vechten has inserted Cupid and Psyche into his emblem, Fitzgerald's emblem presents Gatsby and Daisy as the oculist's sign (Gatsby) and the billboard face (Daisy) respectively. Burrows points out that Cugat has inserted a naked woman into the pupils of the two eyes on his cover: it can be added that this device echoes the insertion of the coded subtext that Fitzgerald has made an open secret in his coded novel with an ever-present key. The exploration of the oculist's billboard motif comes to a head in the dialogue between George Wilson and Mavro Michaelis over the meaning of the oculist's sign. Wilson sees God in the sign, implying the absent all-seeing eye. Michaelis sees the sign for what it is materially, a commercial advertisement.

<sup>45</sup> The derivation of the cover imagery from Cugat's sketches shows that there was at some stage only one eye. The origin of the cover in an alchemical emblem is more likely. Christopher Burrows, 'Stories Behind Classic Book Covers: *The Great Gatsby*.', *American Writers Museum*, 19 October (2017). At: <https://americanwritersmuseum.org/stories-behind-classic-book-covers-the-great-gatsby>.

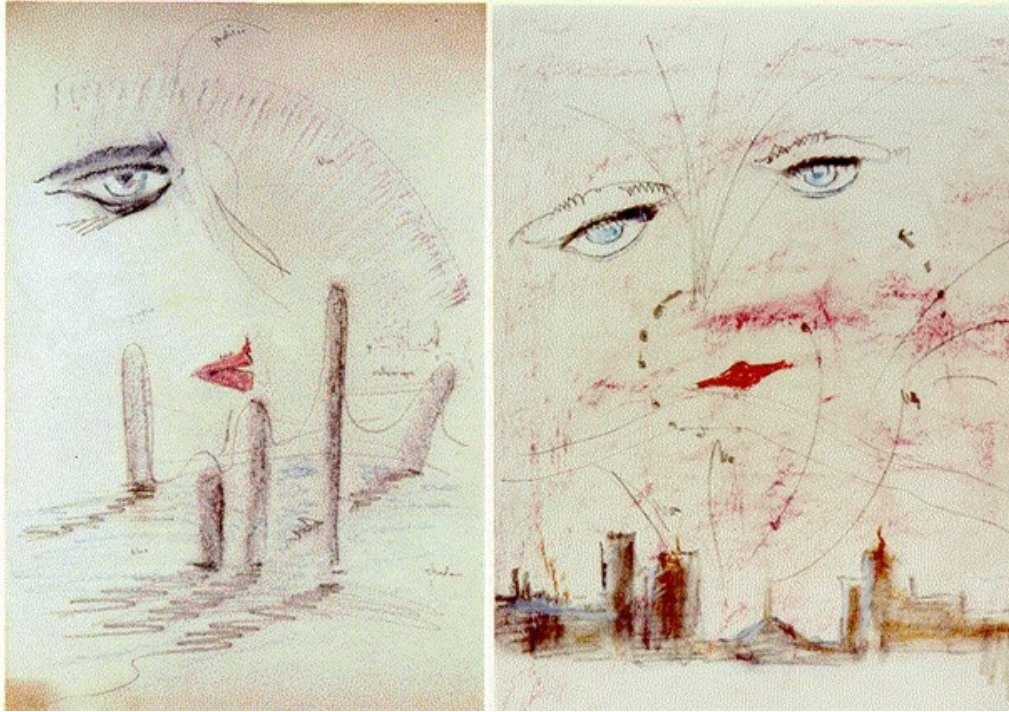


Figure 6. Francis Cugat's sketches for the cover of *Gatsby*.

*Gatsby's* death marks Fitzgerald's creation of another original alchemical emblem. Alchemy is so important to the structure of Van Vechten's novel, *The Blind Bow-Boy*, that the protagonist, Harold Prewett is named after the *hard wet* alchemical method. The hard wet method is described in an alchemical document called *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*.<sup>46</sup> The Valentine document features twelve alchemical emblems called keys. *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine's* eighth key contributes heavily to a lengthy and important chapter in Van Vechten's novel, the visit to Coney Island. Fitzgerald, who used Van Vechten's novel as a model for *Gatsby*, used alchemy to structure his novel more closely than did Van Vechten. Following Van Vechten's use of *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* Fitzgerald has *Gatsby's* corpse floating on a mattress in his pool, a rendering of the seventh key (VII. *Clavis*) from *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* series of emblems.

The emblematic novel is not a recognized genre, so it is not surprising that the emblem that Fitzgerald assembles through the imagery in this scene remains concealed. Contributing to the difficulty is the abstract language that appears to be a detailed description of the scene of *Gatsby's* death:

There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg

<sup>46</sup> *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* (Ein kurtz summarischer Tractat, von dem grossen Stein der Uralten...) (Eisleben, 1599). At: <https://www.alchemywebsite.com/twelvkey.html>.

of transit, a thin red circle in the water. It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete.<sup>47</sup>

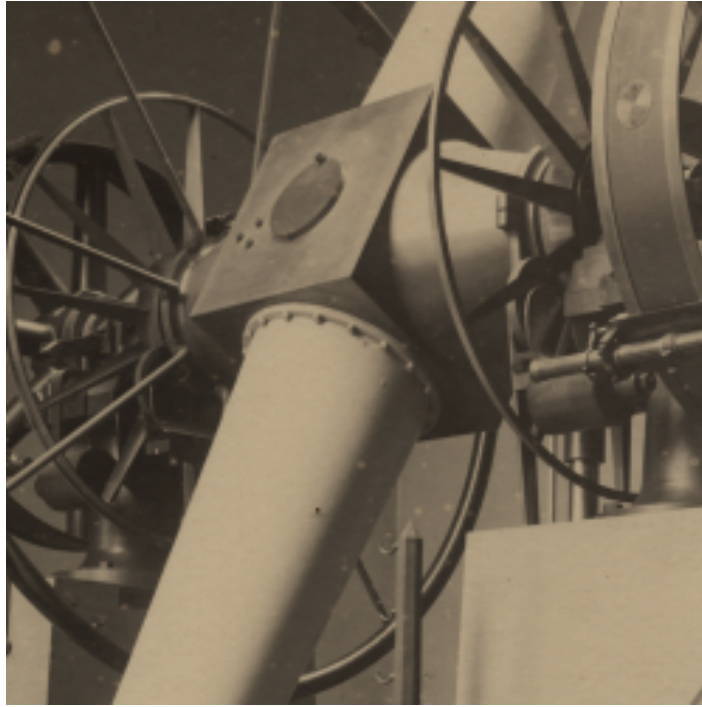


Figure 7. Transit Circle

In this expressive, chiming passage, Gatsby is reduced to being only what the mattress is laden by; he is not shown. Fitzgerald concentrates on Gatsby's surroundings, which are given an illusory clarity through the numerous details cataloged in the passage. If the plan of this description is filled out and normalized in the way of a realistic commentary, we are still left wondering why the circle is drawn with a transit instead of a compass, which is the tool used to draw a circle. Placing this scene in a graphic context, the red circle that surrounds Gatsby floating on his square mattress means that he is arranged exactly like Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The cabalistically-coded way that we are forced to read this esoteric novel, brings the phrase "transit, a thin red circle" into one semantic unit, which names a device known as the transit circle. The transit circle is a wheel on a telescope used to raise and lower the instrument.

Fitzgerald introduces the transit circle to summon the imagery of the enneagram, a circle with nine equidistant points on its circumference, a figure that was central to the Gurdjieff Work, where it is linked to the Law of Seven and the Law of Three. Thus, Gatsby is not only squaring the circle as the ideal Vitruvian man, but he is also centered on the enneagram/ transit wheel.

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<sup>47</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 99.

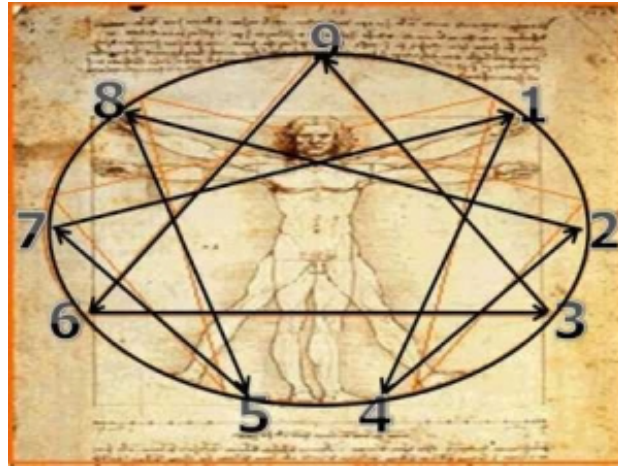


Figure 8. The Enneagram-Vitruvian Man Emblem

In the discussion of the Tarot above, we saw that Ouspensky discourses on a spread of the entire Tarot deck on a triangle within a square. The origin of Ouspensky's figure is not from the Tarot but from alchemy. However, the identification of Ouspensky's spread gives Gatsby's emblematic depiction in the pool a relation to the Tarot as an expression of the Absolute as well as to alchemical perfection.



Figure 9. Seventh Key from *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*.

### Alchemy in *The Great Gatsby*

Alchemy is a secret body of knowledge concerned with the gaining of a treasure. In summary, though a definitive count is difficult, thousands of alchemical manuscripts and books are known to exist, reflecting a textual tradition that spans from ancient times to the present day, with particularly significant periods in late antiquity, the medieval Islamic world, and Renaissance Europe. Whether the treasure is wealth or enlightenment depends upon the understanding of the

seeker. The secrets of alchemy are protected by codes and ambiguous graphic images. What has been recorded in this way are the processes that must be used to produce the treasure. The processes are called the Great Work. As alchemy is a secret process, the exact method is unknown. The stages of the process, the order of the stages, and the number of stages varies from text to text, though most agree that there are at least four, Nigredo, Albedo, Citrinitas and Rubedo. One hundred and ten (110) alchemical processes have been named, though most schemes stop at seven: Calcination, Dissolution, Separation, Conjunction, Fermentation, Distillation, and Coagulation.



Figure 10. The *Nigredo* Phase of Alchemy.

The passage that has summoned the controversy about Gatsby's race is the most tangible manifestation of alchemy in *The Great Gatsby*: "As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry."<sup>48</sup> Fitzgerald has used the cabala code to stretch the word *alchemy* across the span of the twenty-four words quoted above. The *nigredo* stage of alchemy is an inescapable assignment given the declaration by the text that alchemy is being addressed. The *nigredo* phase, or blackening, represents the initial stage of transformation, often symbolized by darkness, putrefaction, and decomposition. The alchemical engraving from *Theatrum Chemicum* (1613) above is an illustration of the *nigredo* phase. The

<sup>48</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 44.

raven symbolizes this initial, black stage of transformation, representing the dark matter that needs to be transformed. The alchemist's corpse with the raven, symbolizes the spiritual death of the practitioner.

Fitzgerald has rendered the above emblem in his narrative as a limousine containing two African-American men and a woman. The complex intertextuality at play in this passage relates the narrative action where Gatsby and Tom vie for Daisy with the process of alchemy that breaks down the defenses that have formerly sustained the characters. To guide the reader to these complexities Fitzgerald has inserted two lawful inexactitudes into the passage, the eyes of the African-American men having yolks instead of whites and the reversal of social norms whereby a white driver works for an African-American.

The use of the word chauffeur is yet an additional pointer to alchemy, since the origin of the word chauffeur is stoker. Alchemists are stokers of the athanor, the alchemical furnace. And the word chauffeur also means to heat. The *nigredo* stage involved the heating and cooking of substances, often in a furnace or similar vessel. (Inescapably, the valley of ashes calls up the *nigredo* phase with its suggestion of the presence of the fires that have produced the monumental heaps of residue.) This was believed to cleanse the material and reduce it to a uniform black matter before further transformation could occur. One of the chief mysteries of alchemy was the identification of the black mass (*prima materia*, first matter) that was to be processed into the Stone.<sup>49</sup> The furnace in this context is a tool for applying the intense heat needed for this initial stage of breakdown and purification. The alchemical furnace enters the novel with the “stove” and “tears,”<sup>50</sup> when Gatsby and Daisy meet at Nick's house for the first time. Distillation was often referred to as *sublimatio* in alchemical terms, which describes the symbolic process of how a base substance is transformed into a higher substance through an ascending movement. “The Work, the name by which Gurdjieff's teachings are most usually known, is drawn from alchemy, where the Great Work signified the refinement and purification of base metals into gold as well as the transmutation of the soul into a higher spiritual state. Gurdjieff's teachings similarly aimed at the transformation of man's inner substance. Through cosmological speculations, through lectures, manual work, communal life, and sacred dances or ‘Movements’ in successive phases of his life, Gurdjieff offered a practical form of esoteric instruction that could harmonize the microcosm of the human being with the macrocosm of the universe and so reunite man with the Endlessness or supreme deity.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “The basis of the opus, the *prima materia*, is one of the most famous secrets of alchemy. This is hardly surprising, since it represents the unknown substance that carries the projection of the autonomous psychic content. It was of course impossible to specify such a substance, because the projection emanates from the individual and is consequently different in each case. For this reason, it is incorrect to maintain that the alchemists never said what the *prima materia* was; on the contrary, they gave all too many definitions and so were everlastingly contradicting themselves. For one alchemist the *prima materia* was quicksilver, for others it was ore, iron, gold, lead, salt, sulphur, vinegar, water, air, fire, earth, blood, water of life, lapis, poison, spirit, cloud, sky, dew, shadow, sea, mother, moon, dragon, Venus, chaos, microcosm”, Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980 [1968]).

<sup>50</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Seymour B. Ginsburg, *Gurdjieff Unveiled* (Lighthouse Workbooks: Digital Edition, 2005), p. xi.

Thus, whatever may be true about Gatsby's race, the imposition of alchemy onto the narrative has made the surface text markedly ambiguous. It is only by recourse to the coded subtext and to the symbolic subtext of emblems that any assignment can be made to the semiotic contents of the novel. Fitzgerald shows the reader the sequence of alchemical stages through the colors of objects, just as the colors follow in the correct order. It is much more difficult to access the Sixteen (16) alchemical emblems presented in the novel, for it is not obvious that they are present. The existence of the alchemical emblems must be discovered through close examinations of the text and a knowledge of a wide range of lore. For instance, even though Daisy makes an odd declaration, there is no reason to associate what she says with alchemy. Daisy says, "I love to see you at my table, Nick. You remind me of a—of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?" She turned to Miss Baker for confirmation: "An absolute rose?"<sup>52</sup> Daisy is supposed to be shallow, so there is no reason to see her use of "absolute" as anything beyond exaggerated showing off. Daisy is used to allude to the alchemical rose. The closed petals and hidden core of the rose symbolize the hidden nature of alchemical knowledge and the secret process of transformation. The rose is seen as a symbol of the alchemical "Great Work," the journey of personal transformation and the attainment of spiritual enlightenment.



Figure 11. The Alchemical Rose.

<sup>52</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 14.

## Roman à clef

We have seen that *The Great Gatsby* is a roman à clef due to the presence of G. I. Gurdjieff as Meyer Wolfsheim. The followers of Orage considered Gurdjieff to be a flawed individual. However, they accepted his Fourth Way system as a genuine method of spiritual liberation. For that reason, *Gatsby* and many other Oragean works of fiction cast Gurdjieff as a villain.

Other people portrayed in the novel are as follows:

P. D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky is the “owl-eyed man.” His name is alternatively spelled, Uspensky. The Ouspensky spelling used by Fitzgerald is a clue used to help the reader in identifying Ouspensky through the phonetic similarities between owl and Ouspensky. Ouspensky was an important disseminator of the Gurdjieff Work through his unpublished book, *In Search of the Miraculous*. As Ouspensky is encountered by Nick in *Gatsby*’s library, the theme of the encounter being “real books” establishes Ouspensky as having created a real account of Gurdjieff’s esoteric teachings.

Carl Van Vechten. *Gatsby*’s houseguest or “boarder” Ewing Klipspringer is Carl Van Vechten. The placement Klipspringer in *Gatsby*’s house suggests the importance of Van Vechten to the composition of Fitzgerald’s novel. However, the more one unpacks the novel, the more the sense of the near impossibility of one author writing the novel comes to mind. Fitzgerald also names other figures in the code that do not appear as characters. There is a very real possibility that Van Vechten in concert with the named figures formed a team that assisted Fitzgerald in the authorship of *The Great Gatsby*. Only in this way would it have been possible for the intricate and pervasive code to have been composed while the esoteric level consisting of Tarot, alchemy, the Fourth Way, and the Kabbalah was assembled into a novel that is a cornerstone of American literature, widely lauded for its captivating story and exploration of significant themes.

In a second passage that inserts Van Vechten into the narrative’s action, another person is inserted through the coded level of the text. Klipspringer-Van Vechten calls on the telephone:

“What I called up about was a pair of shoes I left there. I wonder if it’d be too much trouble to have the butler send them on. You see, they’re tennis shoes, and I’m sort of helpless without them. My address is care of B. F.—”<sup>53</sup>

The code says *Helps with issues* [helps with ~~tenn~~ is shoes]. The sentence without a name rather perversely indicates that a name is being given: the name is [Jean] *Toomer*—“too much....butler.” The presence of *Jean* in the paragraph above is obscured by difficult code. The repetitive form of this presentation is standard phonetic-syllabic cabala. Here Fitzgerald states that Jean Toomer assisted him in writing *The Great Gatsby*. Jean Toomer’s name also is inserted in a passage that

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<sup>53</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 103.

discusses blue honey. The blue honey is a lawful inexactitude used to alert the reader to Toomer's name.<sup>54</sup>

In the same way that Jean Toomer appears in the code, Fitzgerald has also inserted the names of Muriel Draper, Zora Neale Hurston, Thyra Samter Winslow, and E. E. Cummings.

Muriel Draper is named in the episode where Nick first visits Daisy in very difficult code: "dresser was garnished with a toilet set of pure."<sup>55</sup> Draper was Vital to Orage's organization and a close friend of Van Vechten's. When Gurdjieff was in New York, she was his host and secretary.

"Green tickets" points to a legominism. The promised hidden content is Zora Neale Hurston's name: "surname...lean...the...murmur...hinted."<sup>56</sup> This is quite opaque. Hurston was the overseer of the codework for all the novelists who were Orage's followers. She has hypercoded her own name. "Surname" reveals what is being divulged just as "painting" set up the Boucher artwork. Sight, sound and sense are emphasized. The code is more phonetic than syllabic and runs in reverse.

The paragraph below presents the name of writer Thyra Samter Winslow sounded in reverse:

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again.<sup>57</sup>

Winslow was a popular writer in the 1920s and was known to Fitzgerald. However, no intimate connection between the two has been established. The text suggests that racial identity is a theme that interested Fitzgerald in Samter's writing.

The passage below presents the name of the poet E. E. Cummings:

Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old—even then it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg, especially, still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle

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<sup>54</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 25

<sup>55</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 107.

<sup>57</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, pp. 106-107.

leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home.<sup>58</sup>

E. E. Cummings also appeared in Van Vechten's *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Cummings made only a cameo appearance and there was no indication of Van Vechten's reason for including him. Cummings was a follower of A. R. Orage, and it is nearly certain that his appearance in *Gatsby* is related to the part he played in the composition of Fitzgerald's novel.

Finally, there is the problem of A. R. Orage. Orage's name is found in the code throughout the novel. For instance, the passage below renders the name A. R. Orage through sound and an anagram: "The whole town is desolate. All the cars have the left rear wheel painted black as a mourning wreath, and there's a persistent wail all night along the north shore." "How gorgeous! Let's go back, Tom. Tomorrow!"<sup>59</sup> What Nick says about mourning is an intentional error (or conscious discrepancy) used to underscore the presence of Orage's name. The "persistent wail" is a clue to the need to listen to the internal sounds of the language. Many similar instances of Orage's name are found in *Gatsby*. This is a standard practice in Oragean modernist, emblematic novels. It is also common for Orage to be used as a messianic character in the later Oragean modernist novels, such as boatman Red Norgaard in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) and Prophet David in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). However, Orage makes no appearance as a character in either *The Blind Bow-Boy* or *The Great Gatsby*.

## Conclusion

*The Great Gatsby* opens with Nick Carraway discoursing on the normal man: "The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men."<sup>60</sup> It is not apparent that Nick's words do not at all mean what they seem to be saying. Man is a vast topic and must be dealt with expediently. Here we can only supply one quotation to address this topic:

Certainly "normal man" for Gurdjieff is the antithesis of "average man," who is unconscious, imbalanced, and mechanical—qualities which he considers completely abnormal. For Gurdjieff, normalcy is related to harmony. It implies a state of equilibrium brought about by the balance of intellectual, emotional, instinctive, and moving centers—a balance he finds lacking in most human beings.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 108.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, P. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Anna Challenger, "The 'Tales' Themselves: An Overview." *Gurdjieff International Review*. (Gurdjieff Electronic Publishing, 1990).

In Gatsby's death scene we are shown the harmonious man in exactly the ideal posture. He is arranged in an emblem of balance. Of course, this is not materially true, as in the fictive narrative of the novel he is dead. And we are, as I have said above, not shown him through the imagery of words in his state of being a corpse. It is only through the crystallization of a transformation of alchemical wordplay that Fitzgerald has managed to bring about the magnum opus that is shown in Gatsby's final state. Finally, as we look back through the stages of the journey that has brought about Gatsby's spiritual transformation, we can see that the novel traces the traditional stages of the alchemical process using colors: black (*nigredo*), white (*albedo*), yellow (*citrinitas*), and red (*rubedo*), representing various stages of purification and transformation. Traced through the novel, this fourfold alchemical scheme gives us the black wreath on the door when Gatsby bought his house, the white dresses that Daisy wears, Gatsby's yellow car, and Gatsby's pink suits and the red circle of leaves around Gatsby's mattress floating in the pool.

Gatsby is a messianic figure, but he is not Orage who is a man of superhuman action. Fitzgerald's use of Nick as Gurdjieff's Beelzebub having come down to Earth demotes human possibilities to an abstraction. Fitzgerald's novel expresses an early version of Orage's teachings where the superman ideal was not yet dominant in the emblematic novel.

Many questions remain to be dealt with now that *The Great Gatsby* is shown to be esoteric. The extent to which Jean Toomer was involved in the composition of *Gatsby* influences the notion that Jay Gatsby is passing for white; Gatsby's passing is even more relevant since Jean Toomer was accused of passing for white. Perhaps the greatest question that needs examination is the proposition that race is the black material (*prima materia*) of the novel's spiritual alchemy, for the objective historical drama that the Orageans were striving to enact had an agenda of racial equality.