Ineffable Gaudiness and Riotous Excursions: Carnival Imagery in "The Great Gatsby"

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INEFFABLE GAUDINESS AND RIOTOUS EXCURSIONS:
CARNIVAL IMAGERY IN
THE GREAT GATSBY

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Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Maura Kathryn Mahoney
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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the richness and depth of the language of the six party scenes in The Great Gatsby -- the Buchanans' formal dinner party, Myrtle Wilson's tumultuous Washington Heights get-together, Nick's tea-party, the final luncheon and Plaza cocktail party, and the two exuberant, extravagant, and frenzied parties at Gatsby's West Egg mansion -- reveals an extensive use of a carnival motif in F. Scott Fitzgerald's artistic design. Basic characteristics of carnival -- ritual, revelry, disorder, glitter, tawdriness, illusion, and artifice, among others -- are assimilated into the texture of these episodes, evoking a world in which the devotion to high-pitched gaiety mingles with and eventually founders on the dedication to sham values. Traditionally, carnival behavior is a yearly outburst of festive transgression; in The Great Gatsby, carnival values are not simply seasonal, they are extended and prolonged. Ultimately, the "universe of ineffable gaudiness" created by the inhabitants of that "slender riotous island" proves as empty and as ephemeral as Gatsby's dream.
INEFFABLE GAUDINESS AND RIOTOUS EXCURSIONS:

CARNIVAL IMAGERY IN

THE GREAT GATSBY
On 20 November 1924, shortly after receiving the manuscript for *The Great Gatsby*, Maxwell Perkins sent Fitzgerald a letter of congratulations. He mentioned a few minor reservations, then went on to exclaim in praise:

> The general brilliant quality of the book makes me ashamed to make even these criticisms. The amount of meaning you get into a sentence, the dimensions and intensity you make a paragraph carry, are most extraordinary. The manuscript is full of phrases which make a scene blaze with life. (Dear Scott/Dear Max, 84)

Perkins’s critical successors have been examining and illustrating Fitzgerald’s ability to "make his scenes blaze with life" and to insinuate many levels of meaning into his sentences ever since. Surprisingly, though, one such level has received very little critical attention: Fitzgerald’s use of carnival imagery. Although the conduct of Gatsby’s guests, who comport themselves "according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks" (41) and Nick’s description of Gatsby’s brightly-lit mansion as looking "like the World’s Fair" (82) have been well-noted, only Joan M. Allen, in *Candles and Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, has recognized and extensively considered the significance of what is "variously described as an amusement park, carnival, circus, or the ‘world’s fair’" (100) in Fitzgerald’s artistic vision. According to Allen, the dual nature of the carnival, its glitter and its squalor, frequently serves
as "Fitzgerald's metaphor for the 'active secular world'" (100), appearing "in his notebooks, in all of the novels, and in several stories" (100) -- most strikingly in the originally intended prologue to The Great Gatsby, the short story "Absolution."

While Allen's important recognition of the carnival and circus imagery in the novel is extremely helpful, her primary preoccupation with Fitzgerald's Catholic sensibility leads her, as Jackson Bryer has commented, to emphasize candles over carnival lights (162). In other words, her concern with the carnival metaphor in The Great Gatsby is essentially an intermediate one -- a means to discovering a specifically Roman Catholic moral sense of the novel. Because she directs her argument toward this end, and because she does not focus on the concept of carnival itself, Allen overlooks a great deal of imagery and underestimates Fitzgerald's use of the motif by discussing its thematic function only. By examining the definition and morphology of what Marianne Mesnil has termed the "carnivalesque festival," (186) and its correspondence both in the "universe of ineffable gaudiness" (99) of Gatsby's parties, and in the carnival atmosphere of the other parties in the novel, it can be established that the motif has a structural function as well -- it informs and unifies the social gatherings of The Great Gatsby.

Originally the term carnival, "carne levere," or "the putting away or removal of flesh" designated the season of merry-making before Lent (OED), but as Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed out, "even in its narrow sense carnival is far from being a simple phenomenon with only one meaning" (218). Because, of course, Fitzgerald was not trying to incorporate a sociological treatise on "Twelfth Night in the Twenties" or "Long Island
Mardi Gras" into *The Great Gatsby*, the carnival motif naturally is not "narrowly presented," nor is it explicit. However, Fitzgerald unquestionably assimilated certain basic characteristics of carnival into his artistic design: while the modern-day derivative of the carnival may simply refer to a travelling amusement park, it can also be understood to mean a festival in which some sort of religious impulse is subsidiary to wild revelry, in which order is turned "topsy-turvy," in which the distinction between illusion and reality, artifice and nature is blurred, and which is, in the words of Mesnil, a "community expression with the mask providing material support" (186).

At any rate, the glamour, gaudiness, and "spectroscopic gayety" (45) of Gatsby's parties clearly manifest the carnival impulse -- Fitzgerald conveys both sparkle and vulgarity through lyrical imagery and understated irony. In Chapter III, Nick ritualizes the festive proceedings of an evening at his neighbor's by first giving a general description of all of Gatsby's parties before building up to the events of one particular gathering. A relevant frame of reference for these rituals can be found in Alessandro Falassi's morphology of traditional festive rites in *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*. Drawing upon the studies of Bakhtin, Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Mesnil, and others, Falassi provides a general breakdown of the "quantitatively ever-recurrent and qualitatively ever-important" (4) constituent elements of festival. These include rites of valorization, that modify the conventional function of space and time; rites of purification and cleansing, by means of fire, water or air; rites of reversal, such as the inversion of sex roles; rites of conspicuous display; rites of conspicuous consumption; and rites of competition, often in the forms of
These general elements of festival can all be found in Chapter III. At Gatsby's bashes, the rite of valorization, in which "an area is reclaimed, cleared, delimited, blessed, adorned, forbidden to normal activities" (Time, 4), is performed by the high priests of his carnivals -- "a corps of caterers." According to Nick's observations, Gatsby's "overpopulated lawn," which Falassi would term the "theater of festivities," is transformed "at least once a fortnight" when a "corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden" (39). Interestingly, an area that would not undergo such "valorization" for the party, the library, is precisely where carnival illusion is punctured -- by Owl Eyes's investigation of and insistence on the "realness" of Gatsby's books. A sense of timelessness is created and emphasized by Fitzgerald's use of the present tense in the three paragraphs that are capped by: "The party has begun" (41) -- and corresponds to what Falassi would label festival "time out of time," a "special temporal dimension devoted to special activities...an autonomous duration, not so much to be perceived and measured in days or hours, but to be divided internally by what happens within it..." (4). Gatsby's party cannot begin until "the last swimmers are in from the beach" (40), which can be seen on one level as having symbolic, if debased, affinities to rites of cleansing by water, and the text's affinities to rites of conspicuous display and conspicuous consumption are, well, conspicuous. Although rites of competition do not seem to be formalized, there are certain festive games: later on in the novel, Nick looks over at Gatsby's house, which is blazing with light, and
thinks at first that "it was another party, a wild rout that had resolved itself into 'hide-and-go-seek' or 'sardines-in-the-box' with all the house thrown open to the game" (82), and other antics include doing "stunts" and forming singing quartets.

But even the broadest understanding of carnival atmosphere can be applied to Fitzgerald's depiction of Gatsby's parties. The passive, deliberately indefinite opening statement of Chapter III, "There was music from my neighbor's home through the summer nights" (39) immediately establishes a sense that the specificity of concrete facts and reality has been set aside in favor of a dreamy evocation that emphasizes illusion. Fluidity and instability -- even suspension of such ordinary restrictions as gravity -- reinforce the enchanted quality of the scene. People come and go, there is a "sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light" (40), groups of guests "change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath," and Nick is "ill at ease among the swirls and eddies of people" (41). "Floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden" (40), trays "float...through the twilight" (43), and a girl can "seize a cocktail out of the air" (41). There are "pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold" (40), and Nick half-bemusedly, half-deflatingly thinks of the premature moon as having been "produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket" (43).

Circus imagery is prominent; there are salads of "harlequin designs" (40), the house is "gaudy with primary colors," the wandering, confident young girls are described as "gypsies" (41), people perform "stunts" between the orchestra's numbers, and the girls in twin yellow dresses do a "baby act in costume" (47). The guests who observe
amusement park "rules of behavior" need bring only "a simplicity of heart" as their "ticket of admission" (41).

Although Nick emphasizes that he is one of the few "who had actually been invited" (41), he knows no more about his host than any of the other guests. Few people meet Gatsby, but speculation about him is rife -- and the self-created persona of Jay Gatsby can be seen as a kind of a mask that Jimmy Gatz uses to hide his real identity. Nick's description of Gatsby creates an impression that his neighbor's very looks are in a sense superimposed: "his tanned skin was drawn attractively tight on his face" (50). There is also a moment during the party, when Nick is recounting his reaction to Gatsby's smile, that the persona slips a bit, and the effect is exactly that of an unmasking:

It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life...It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that moment it vanished -- and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck. (48)

Although the medley of "faces and voices and color" (40) may at first seem dazzling, right from the beginning various intimations of corruption undermine the allure of the magical, misty, never-never land of Gatsby's garden and suggest the tawdry, false, profane, and ultimately, nightmarish aspect of the carnival. Often the very imagery that lends such lyricism to the description will have a double-edge, as when Fitzgerald writes: "In his blue gardens the men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (39). The phrase "blue gardens" introduces the first note of unnaturalness or artificiality, while the comparison of the men and
girls to moths denotes the character of Gatsby's guests: not only are they like insects, and therefore less-than-human -- they are fragile, fluttery creatures that conceive a fatal attraction to bright lights. Since in this quality the guests resemble their host, whose attraction to the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, and less abstractly, to her face, "sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth" (9) will prove fatal, the description contains a muted but undeniable prefiguration of doom. There is perhaps also the first insinuation of the carnival's relaxation of everyday prohibitions in the coming and going of the men and girls, and particularly in the pairing of "men" with "girls" instead of with "women." Although undoubtedly modern sensitivities are more alert to the use of the term "girls" in such a context, it is worth taking note that near the end of the party, "old men" are quite definitely paired with "young girls" and the suggestion of impropriety is fairly strong: "old men were pushing young girls backwards in eternal graceless circles" (46).

These themes of artificiality, falseness, and licentiousness continue to inform the text and to convey a sense of the excesses of the carnival. Less lyrical than "blue gardens" but just as loaded with sinister implications is the sentence describing twilight: "the lights go brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher" (40). The very earth is drunk, and worse, the natural source of light, the sun, is abandoned. Artificiality is again expressed in the "opera of voices" since an opera is staged emotion rather than genuine emotion, and in the "enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names" (40), in the books whose
realness must be ascertained, in the girls with the dyed hair, in their "baby act" -- an impersonation of innocence -- and in the woman whose mascara makes her tears look black. The party is launched when a girl, who is said to be "Gilda Gray's understudy from the Follies" (41), dances out alone on to the canvas platform. In other words, the party is galvanized when a professional role-player gives a performance. In a further ironic twist, even the rumor about her identity is "erroneous."

As the evening wears on, the "fraternal hilarity" (50) grows -- and the relinquishment of responsibility becomes more marked. The guests lack responsibility for their very presence on the scene, for although people show up without being invited, they are not in control of their destination: "They got into automobiles that bore them out to Long Island, and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door" (41). Owl Eyes maintains this rejection of responsibility when he demands of Nick:

"Who brought you? Or did you just come? I was brought. Most people were brought" (46). This irresponsibility will later climax in the serio-comic car-wreck scene at the end of the party, but there are other less overt instances of the recklessness of the guests. Their first activity is diving, and in a sense they continue to "throw themselves" throughout the party, right up to the point where "girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, knowing that someone would arrest their falls" (50). Admittedly, there is a difference in intensity between diving and swooning, but the idea of reckless abandonment remains constant.

The implications of the metaphor of falling also cannot be ignored, as the antics of the guests become increasingly less innocent. By the end of the evening, "most of the remaining women" are having
fights with "men said to be their husbands" (52), Nick observes a man "talking with curious intensity to a young actress" (52) and then watches the "flank attacks" of the man's wife: "at intervals she appeared at his side like an angry diamond and hissed: "You promised!" into his ear" (52). Often, the description of the goings-on fulfills a primarily comic purpose, as in the following scene:

The reluctance to go home was not confined to wayward men. The hall was at present occupied by two deplorably sober men and their highly indignant wives. The wives were sympathizing with each other in slightly raised voices:

"Whenever he sees I'm having a good time he wants to go home."
"Never heard anything so selfish in my life."
"We're always the first ones to leave."
"So are we."
"Well, we're almost the last tonight," one of the men said sheepishly. "The orchestra left half an hour ago." (52)

Although the sex role inversion certainly adds to the humor, it might not be unwarranted to remember that role inversion, according to Falassi, is one of the traditional elements of the carnivalesque festival.²

The party's over when "the caterwauling of horns had reached a crescendo" (56) during the car-wreck, but one final aspect of Gatsby's parties should not be overlooked. Just as originally the carnival provided an outlet before the Lenten season, Gatsby's parties are also prompted, at least in part, by an underlying "religious" reason: Gatsby, Nick tells us, was a "son of God" who "must be about his Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (99). The vastness, vulgarity, and meretriciousness of Gatsby's parties is evident; that he is carrying out "his Father's business" is suggested by Fitzgerald's use of ironic religious overtones, which are
unmistakably present, if fairly subtle. On this level, Gatsby's garden becomes a Garden of Eden, but it is clearly revealed to be a false paradise. Eight servants, including an extra gardener, must toil on Mondays to repair the "ravages of the night before" (39), but the very fact that they can repair the garden indicates that it is a garden fashioned by man rather than by God. There is fruit in this garden, but since it is used in alcoholic beverages, it brings disorientation and illusion rather than knowledge. Moreover, the only offerings during these rituals are the "happy, vacuous bursts of laughter" that "rose toward the summer sky" (47). While laughter seems benign enough, "vacuous" implies the meaninglessness of these offerings. It may also be worth remembering that traditionally, when the carnival ended, Ash Wednesday began the season of commemoration of Christian redemption that culminated in the celebration of Easter Sunday. The invocation of religious language at the conclusion of Gatsby's party intimates why, ultimately, his carnival leads only to the Valley of Ashes. There is indeed a "wafer of a moon" and the last thing the guests see is the "figure of the Host" (56), but this "religion" brings no revelation, or comfort, or love: "A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell" (56).

By Gatsby's final party, emptiness "seems to flow" throughout the entire evening, not just at the party's conclusion -- for in Chapter VI, Fitzgerald unremittingly exposes the hollowness of the "ineffably gaudy" goings-on. While the earlier party had at least been imbued with a sense of enchantment, this time the "same many-colored, many-keyed
commotion" (105) barely manifests even surface sparkle -- it seems only garish and dissonant. It is as if "the foul dust that floated in the wake of his [Gatsby's] dreams" (2) has already begun to seep into and poison the atmosphere, for what had seemed amusing and entertaining turns "septic on the air now" (107). As Joan M. Allen has remarked, "At Gatsby's second party, Nick senses a new oppressiveness and harshness in the air; the layers of glamour are gradually being stripped from the carnival, and its true nature surfaces" (Candles, 107).

Much of the glamour is stripped away by the presence of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, who come to West Egg for the first time -- although they are not entirely immune to the attractions of the carnival. Tom goes off alone, he claims, because he is amused by a fellow who is "getting off some funny stuff" (107), and Daisy admires a woman who epitomizes artifice: the movie star, "a gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman" (106). However, for the most part, the freewheeling, ostentatiously tacky festival disgusts the Buchanans. Tom arrogantly scans the crowd, assumes a superior stance by insisting "I was just thinking I don't know a soul here" (107), and deflates the aura of the "sparkling hundreds" (105) of guests by seeing through their glitter. At the end of the party, he unmasks them, in a sense, by labelling Gatsby's party for what it is: he contemptuously refers to it as a "menagerie" (109). Although she tries to hide it, Daisy is little more captivated by the scene than Tom. As Nick recognizes, aside from the movie star, the rest of the party offends her:

But the rest offended her -- and inarguably, because it wasn't a gesture but an emotion. She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented "place" that Broadway had begotten on a Long Island fishing village -- appalled by
its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by
the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a
short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful
in the very simplicity she failed to understand. (108)

The Buchanans' disdain certainly affects Nick's perception of the world
of Gatsby's parties. He speculates that he may have "merely grown used
to it, grown to accept West Egg as a world complete in itself, with its
own standards and its own great figures" (105), and that seeing it again
through Daisy's eyes has changed it for him: "It is invariably
saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have
expended your own powers of adjustment" (105). His comments squarely
expose Daisy's snobbishness (not to mention his own), but they also
emphasize another similarity of Gatsby's parties to the carnivalesque
festivals that Marianne Mesnil discusses: they unquestionably define
these West Egg celebrations as a "community expression" (186, my
emphasis).

In any case, it should be noted that even independent of the
Buchanans' East Egg disapproval, the guests' amusement park behavior
does seem fairly out of control. Presumably the same rituals that were
carried out all summer were followed at this party, but Nick only
mentions the "inevitable swimming party...chilled and exalted" (110) --
and the festivities suffer from the lack of even a loose sense of
ceremony. The narration simply focuses on the unconstrained,
unstructured revelry, and perhaps as a result, the pace seems to have
accelerated -- at the earlier party, the merriment built steadily, and
complete chaos broke out only after the customary activities were
observed. In contrast, in Chapter VI, riotous dissipation begins almost
immediately. Nick and Daisy sit down at a "particularly tipsy table"
(107), where a Miss Baedeker tries unsuccessfully to slump against Nick's shoulder. Her condition prompts a bizarre conversation among the other guests:

"Oh, she's all right now. When she's had five or six she always starts screaming like that. I tell her she ought to leave it alone."
"I do leave it alone," the accused affirmed hollowly.
"We heard you yelling, so I said to Doc Civet here: 'There's someone who needs your help, Doc.'"
"She's much obliged, I'm sure," said another friend without gratitude, "but you got her dress all wet when you stuck her head in the pool."
"Anything I hate is to get my head stuck in a pool," mumbled Miss Baedeker. "They almost drowned me once over in New Jersey."
"Then you ought to leave it alone," countered Doctor Civet.
"Speak for yourself!" cried Miss Baedeker violently. "Your hand shakes. I wouldn't let you operate on me!" (107-8)

Episodes of this sort occurred only toward the end of Gatsby's first party.

Furthermore, while the scene is admittedly comic, it also contains implications of the dark side of the guests' carnival lifestyle. Miss Baedeker's name, as Robert Emmet Long points out, alludes to a travel guidebook, and so the focus on a character of that name subtly reinforces the rootlessness of the party-goers (152), who do indeed travel "a shortcut from nothing to nothing" (108). Doctor Civet's name strikes a note of sexual unpleasantness -- civet is the musk-compound obtained from the weasel-like civet-cat -- and the fact that he is a doctor provides a subdued link between Gatsby's "glowing garden" (56) and the Valley of Ashes. Civet's ineffectiveness calls to mind the symbolic impotence of the novel's other, more memorable doctor, Dr. T.
J. Eckleburg -- a "wild wag of an oculist" who erected an enormous advertisement of his eyes and spectacles, and then "sank down into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away" (23), leaving the two-dimensional replica of his eyes to stare blankly, uselessly down on the wasteland. Finally, and perhaps most important, the discussion itself has ominous overtones that cannot be overlooked. Most obviously, the conversation foreshadows Gatsby's death in a swimming pool, but Miss Baedeker's near demise also serves to highlight the hazards of the guests's uninhibited "playfulness," and reminds us of a possibly related incident -- Doctor Civet, according to Nick's timetable guest list in Chapter IV, does drown that summer, up in Maine. Nick does not furnish any details, so it is fruitless to speculate whether someone dunked Civet's head in a pool, but all the same, the detail, when added to the context of the Baedeker conversation, does underscore the potential dangers of the carelessness of the people at Gatsby's parties.

At any rate, the excesses of the guests work against Gatsby's hopes to impress Daisy. After the party, he walks up and down a "desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favors and crushed flowers" (111), miserable in his knowledge that she had not enjoyed herself. Once again, Fitzgerald creates an impression of the mask-like quality of Gatsby's looks by having Nick observe that his neighbor's skin appears stretched over his face -- but the carnival world that Gatsby has created to help disguise his identity seems to have failed to entice Daisy. Gatsby vows that he can repeat the past, but he does not repeat the parties: "It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night -- and, obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over (113).
The repulsive, vulgar buffoon of Petronius's *Satyricon*, Trimalchio reveled in ostentatious, crass displays of his wealth, and pandered to the self-indulgent, materialistic tastes of his parasitic guests -- according to Paul L. MacKendrick, the Trimalchean figure serves as "the symbol of a sick society" (307). Although Gatsby is a far more sympathetic character, the comparison was an important one for Fitzgerald, so much so that he considered titling his novel *Trimalchio*, or *Trimalchio in West Egg* -- and the allusion is certainly apt, for as Richard Godden has pointed out, "Trimalchio gives a comic feast in the *Satyricon*, a Menippean satire whose roots are in carnival" (352).

Not surprisingly, the various aspects of carnival are more loosely involved in the smaller social gatherings than in the dazzling chaos of Gatsby's parties. Yet, while the Buchanans' dinner party, Myrtle Wilson's Washington Heights soirée, Nick's tea-party, and the final luncheon and Plaza cocktail party may seem only to illustrate Jordan Baker's remark, "at small parties there isn't any privacy" (50), they also unquestionably evince sparkle and squalor, disorder and confusion, illusion and artifice, and (to varying degrees) the unrestrained behavior of carnival atmosphere.

Although the exclusive, formal dinner-party in the first chapter is admittedly not exactly an occasion of "wild revelry," it nevertheless does contain several carnival motifs. Dressed in riding clothes and in glistening laced boots, Tom Buchanan serves as a kind of ringmaster. With a flourish of his hand, and with actual physical compulsion, he directs, or attempts to direct, the attention of his audience:

Turning me around by one arm, he moved a broad flat hand along the front vista, including in its sweep a sunken Italian garden, a half
acre of deep, pungent roses, and a snub-nosed motor-boat that bumped the tide offshore.
"It belonged to Demaine, the oil man." He turned me around again... (7-8)

Jordan Baker is also clearly a part of this upper-class circus. Resembling a performing seal, the "balancing girl" (9) refuses at first to acknowledge Nick. Instead, she remains "completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall" (8), and her self-absorbed concentration barely wavers: "Miss Baker's lips fluttered, she nodded at me almost imperceptibly, and then quickly tipped her head back again -- the object she was balancing had obviously tottered a little and given her something of a fright" (9).

Earlier, the whimsical description of the "momentum" of the Buchanans' lawn had introduced a sense that fanciful illusion is inherent in the Buchanan world:

The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials and brick walks and burning gardens -- finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. (6-7)

Inside, Nick's first impression is of a beguiling, enchanted milieu. A "bright rosy-colored space" is "fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end" (8), the breeze turns curtains into "pale flags" (8), twists them upward toward "the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling" (8), and "ripples over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea" (8). The "only completely stationary object" (8) in what Allen has called the "Buchanans' circus tent of a living room" (Candles, 10) is an enormous couch, on which Daisy and Jordan appear to be "buoyed up" as though on "an anchored balloon" (8), and the rippling
and fluttering of their dresses causes Nick to imagine that they "had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house" (8).

However, while the narration continues to bestow a magical quality to the evening -- whenever there is a description of Daisy's captivating voice, when "all subjects vanished into air" (16), when "the crimson room bloomed with light" (18), and when Daisy opens "up again in a flower-like way" (20) -- the party also reveals characteristics of the darker side of the carnival, which lie not too far beneath the gilded surface that the Buchanans present. Intimations that things are somehow out of place build into a growing atmosphere of disorder, dissonance, confusion, and obtrusive artificiality. A muted note of unnaturalness is insinuated into Nick's first enchanted impression of the Buchanans' home: the French windows gleam against the "fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house" (8), and other similar suggestions accrue. The frosted wedding cake of the ceiling is an ironic portent of the artificiality of the Buchanans' domestic situation and their dislocation of the meaning of marriage. Nautical imagery makes it seem as if Nick is out at sea rather than on dry land: "I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall" (8), and later Jordan sits down "as if she were getting into bed" (12).

Innuendoes, tensions, and outright discord are finally explained by Jordan's disclosure that Tom has a mistress, but throughout the entire evening, the atmosphere of confusion and disturbance is exacerbated by the violation of conventional rules of behavior, at least in terms of standards of courtesy. Daisy and Jordan are stretched out full length when Nick enters and neither bothers to assume a more formal
position, they delay acknowledging his presence, Tom rudely dismisses Nick's bond company, Jordan addresses Nick "contemptuously" (11), Tom continually interrupts the others, and Jordan blatantly eavesdrops on her host and hostess. The two women perceptibly make "only a polite pleasant effort to entertain or be entertained" (13), and the sense of artificiality culminates when Nick, "trying to look pleasantly interested and a little deaf" (17), follows Daisy out to the front porch. There, it becomes clear that her beauty serves as little more than a mask; at one point, Fitzgerald's diction calls attention to the notion that her loveliness is little more than a facade by making her face seem nearly a palpably distinct object: "Daisy took her face in her hands as if feeling its lovely shape" (18). In any case, as soon as her spell-binding voice breaks off, Nick feels "the basic insincerity of what she had said" (18), and the nature that her loveliness usually disguises is suggested for an instant: "I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged" (18). The charm of the carnival's sparkle and illusion has palled, and Nick comes to feel that the evening has been a "trick of some sort" (18). He drives away feeling "confused and a little disgusted" (20).

Myrtle Wilson's raucous party represents the carnival at its most tawdry. The decor of the 158th Street apartment provides an appropriately jumbled, disproportionate, and garish setting:

The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles. The only picture was an
over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance, however, the hen resolved itself into a bonnet, and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room. Several copies of Town Tattle lay on the table together with a copy of Simon Called Peter, and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway. (29)

The ways in which the smallest details contribute to the complexity of meaning in Fitzgerald's writing has been discussed and admired by many critics, and many have pointed out that the seemingly incidental Versailles tapestries both compactly highlight Myrtle's pretentiousness and bad taste, and satirically convey the discrepancy between the tackiness and banality of her "salon" and the splendor and elegance of the French court. The mention of Versailles serves as a point of contrast on another level as well, for while it was renowned for its Hall of Mirrors, the Washington Heights apartment is reminiscent of a carnival House of Mirrors instead. While there are no actual mirrors present, Myrtle's "blurred party," to borrow a phrase from Bruce R. Stark, (53), is characterized by an atmosphere of distorted and unstable appearances. We have only to remember the need to step back in order to diminish the distortion of the "over-enlarged" (29) photograph of the stout old lady (who turns out to be Myrtle's mother), to appreciate the similarity to a House of Mirrors, but there are other, less overt examples of distorted appearances. Myrtle's sister Catherine's very features seem exaggerated -- her face is misaligned and has a "blurred air" (30), and just as the furniture is "entirely too large" for the apartment, Myrtle too seems somehow out-of-proportion: "as she expanded the room grew smaller around her," (31). From up close, the photograph of her mother looks like "a hen sitting on a blurred rock" (29) and this
theme of fluctuation of appearance is reflected again in Mr. McKee's compulsion to photograph his wife one hundred and twenty-six times since their marriage.

In the carnival atmosphere, artifice and confusion replace reality and order. Myrtle herself exemplifies artificiality: "The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur" (30-1), "Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment" (31), she speaks in a "high, mincing shout" (31), she laughs "pointlessly" (32) and the room is full of her "artificial laughter" (37). Dressed in her third "costume" (30) of the afternoon, Myrtle is the centerpiece of this carnival, and at one point, she even resembles a carousel: "as she expanded, the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air" (31). The imagery used to describe Catherine also contributes to the carnival atmosphere. As Allen has pointed out:

Myrtle's sister, Catherine, attempts to cover her face with a new one, and she appears in clown make-up. Her powdered white complexion is topped with a solid, sticky red bob, and she has plucked her eyebrows and painted on a new pair at a new, more rakish angle. (112)

Nick attributes the "dim, hazy cast" (29) that clouds his memory of the afternoon to too much liquor, and as a result of the general indulgence (the one exception being Catherine, who feels "just as good on nothing at all" [36]), the party rapidly becomes uncontrollable. Confusion begins early, when Nick is unable to make sense out of Simon Called Peter, which he reads during Tom and Myrtle's disappearance into the bedroom, and when he mistakenly wonders aloud whether Catherine
lives in the apartment, because of her "proprietary haste" (30) and possessive air. By the time the second bottle of whiskey is passed around, it has all become too much for Nick, but each time he tries to leave, he becomes "entangled in some wild, strident argument" which pulls him back "as if with ropes" (36), and he admits "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (36).

As the party stretches on, the confusion, disorder, and carousing mount. Even in the small room, "People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away" (37). Time becomes difficult to gauge; Nick comments: "it was nine o'clock -- and almost immediately afterward I looked at my watch and found it was ten" (37), and shortly thereafter, he relates an incident that occurred "some time toward midnight" (37). That incident, of course, is Tom and Myrtle's argument. When Tom breaks Myrtle's nose, the narration momentarily erases specific identities, which increases the sense of the commotion: "Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor, and women's voices scolding, and high over the confusion, a long broken wail of pain" (37-8). While the chaos continues, Nick retrieves his hat from the chandelier, and leaves with the photographer McKee. The description of the party ends with an emphasis on the slipperiness of reality. There are several abrupt shifts in narrative focus, and events are related elliptically, without explanation of intervening incidents:

...I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands. "Beauty and the Beast ... Loneliness ... Old Grocery Horse ... Brook'n Bridge ..."
Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning Tribune, and waiting for the four o'clock train. (38)

In contrast to the wild, strident, and tumultuous upheaval of conventional order at Myrtle's get-together, Nick's tea-party is quite tame. In fact, there is hardly any "party" to speak of at all, for although it is, ironically, the only social gathering in the novel to be the subject of an entire chapter, Nick's narration concentrates on the preparation for and the aftermath of the party -- and actually, Gatsby's reunion with Daisy essentially preempts the party that brought it about, anyway.

Although it is not really a social gathering of the same order as the other parties in the novel, Nick's tea-party can still be related to the carnival metaphor. A carnival aesthetic informs Gatsby's seduction strategy -- in order to win Daisy, he has pitched his tent, so to speak, directly across the Sound from her home, in the flashiest, most spectacular mansion imaginable. As W. T. Lhamon, Jr., has pointed out, Gatsby must, in a sense, compete with Tom Buchanan's wedding-party (173): "a hundred people in four private cars... a whole floor of the Seelbach hotel... a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars" (77). In his attempt to outshine Tom, Gatsby does not throw just parties, he throws carnivals, and when Daisy fails to wander into one of them, he has to resort to another plan. As Jordan Baker explains, the very reason Gatsby asks that Nick's "cardboard bungalow" (3) be the site of the reunion is to facilitate showing off his personal amusement park:

Something worried me.
"Why didn't he ask you to arrange a meeting?"
"He wants her to see his house," she explained. "And your house is right next door" (80).

The association of Gatsby's estate with a carnival is made explicit at the very beginning of Chapter V. In anticipation of his meeting with Daisy, Gatsby has been wandering through his mansion, glancing into rooms, and as a result, the house is "lit from tower to cellar" (82). Returning to West Egg from a date with Jordan, Nick is taken aback by the spectacle: "the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light, which fell unreal upon the shrubbery and made thin elongating glints upon the roadside wires" (82). The wind blows the wires, makes the lights flicker on and off, and the whole effect is a little too gaudy for Nick. Upon the appearance of his neighbor, he comments disapprovingly: "Your place looks like the World's Fair" (82).

Gatsby's response, a proposition for a little late-night diversion, is telling: "Let's go to Coney Island, old sport. In my car" (82). The proposition demonstrates Gatsby's dedication to carnival atmosphere, and expresses in small the theme of the chapter -- Gatsby's attempt to secure, in this instance, friendship (later, of course, he will try to secure love) by dangling the amusement park attractions of the carnival. When Nick turns him down, he tries again, and his second suggestion is also significant, for it juxtaposes the references to the World's Fair and Coney Island with a foreshadowing of his death: "Well, suppose we take a plunge in the swimming pool? I haven't made use of it all summer" (82). Ultimately, all that Gatsby's allegiance to carnival will obtain for him is death in a swimming pool.

During the tea-party itself, Gatsby does resemble, as Richard Godden has pointed out, "a clown constrained to play a straight-man"
This chapter, Fitzgerald's own favorite, is perhaps the funniest of the novel. Despite his proper white flannel suit, Gatsby cannot refrain from the glitzy touches of a silver shirt and a gold tie; similarly, the seriousness of his reunion is punctuated by wonderfully comic, off-beat moments. When Nick goes to greet Daisy, Gatsby deserts the living room and makes a "nervous circuit of the house" (89), but his attempt to make a nonchalant, gallant entrance is spoiled by the rain, and by his embarrassment:

...there was a light dignified knocking at the front door. I went out and opened it. Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes. (86)

Throughout the reunion, he continues to bumble: he assumes a rather tortured position, reclining in "a strained counterfeit of boredom" (87), with his head leaning back so far that it actually rests against the face of Nick's mantlepiece clock; then he nearly knocks the clock over; he reacts with alarm, blatantly, when Nick makes an excuse to leave and follows his host "wildly" (88) into the kitchen; he responds to Nick's information that the sun is shining with hilariously disproportionate excitement; and later, he nearly topples down a flight of stairs.

Of course, Fitzgerald does not simply play Gatsby for laughs in this scene. He never entirely loses sight -- or allows us to lose sight -- of the qualities that make Gatsby great: his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," "extraordinary gift for hope," and "romantic readiness" (2). Considering the "colossal vitality of his illusion" (97), it is no wonder that he should be overwhelmed by the
situation. After nurturing and clinging to that illusion for five years, Gatsby suddenly finds himself on the brink of possibly unpredictable, uncontrollable reality. Fitzgerald conveys the precariousness of Gatsby's hold on his dream through circus imagery, which casts Gatsby, not in the role of a clown, but of a tightrope walker. Nick watches Gatsby brace himself to go in to Daisy, and relates: "he stalked by me in the hall, turned sharply as if he were on a wire, and disappeared into the living-room" (87, my emphasis). As Nick says, "it wasn't a bit funny" (87).

At any rate, the reunion accomplished, at last Gatsby gets to take Daisy on a tour of his magnificent showplace. Although the amusement park is at the moment deserted, he is careful to inform her that this is not always the case: "I keep it always full of interesting people, night and day. People who do interesting things. Celebrated people" (91). After passing through Marie-Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons, through period bedrooms "swathed in rose and lavender and silk and vivid with new flowers" (92), through dressing-rooms and poolrooms and bathrooms with sunken baths, and finally through his private apartments, the tour ends with the celebrated scene in which Gatsby heaps his luxurious shirts in front of Daisy. Richard Godden has pointed out that the scene exemplifies Trimalchian-like overplaying of wealth, and he suggests that "Gatsby, at this moment, might be the very spirit of carnival" (352).

But Gatsby quits playing Trimalchio -- at least in public -- after he invites Daisy to that party in Chapter VI, for despite her admiration of his beautiful belongings, she is appalled by the rowdy, cacophonous arrivistes that populate Gatsby's amusement park. As a result, the
customary Saturday night activities are cancelled, and the "automobiles which turned expectantly into his drive stayed for just a minute and then turned sulkily away" (113). When Nick learns that even the servants have been dismissed, he once again uses carnival imagery to describe Gatsby's domain: "So the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes" (114).

But while Gatsby's parties are the central expression of the carnival spirit in the novel, as we have seen, the metaphor is involved even in the gatherings that are attended by only a few people rather than by multitudes -- and the final luncheon and its subsequent continuation in New York City is no exception. Admittedly, it is hardly a festive occasion, for like Nick's tea-party, it is brought about by motives that have little to do with the desire for socializing or merry-making, and, like the tea-party, the pretense of a party is soon dropped. The luncheon and cocktail party primarily serve as a forum for the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom, yet the two-part party does contain several carnival motifs and all of the negative aspects of carnival atmosphere. This last party is a fitting finale to the other gatherings in the novel: it depicts the carnival world of *The Great Gatsby* gone completely sour.

The abrupt switch from the episode of Nick's hot, miserable commute to the scene of the luncheon creates a momentary impression that Nick and Gatsby are entering a world that is insulated from everyday distresses:

"Hot!" said the conductor to familiar faces. "Some weather!...Hot!...Hot!...Hot!... Is it hot enough for you? Is it hot? Is it...?"
My commutation ticket came back to me with a dark stain from his hand. That anyone should care in this heat whose flushed lips he kissed, whose head made damp the pajama pocket over his heart!

...Through the hall of the Buchanans' house blew a faint wind, carrying the sound of the telephone bell out to Gatsby and me as we waited at the door. (115)

However, it soon becomes clear that they have escaped neither the heat nor unpleasantness. As they wait at the door, Nick overhears the butler answer the telephone, and he reports what he thought the butler said, as well as what the butler actually did say. Although he does correct himself, Nick has, in effect, prioritized enigmatic illusion over commonplace reality, and in doing so, has opened his description of the luncheon on a sinister, macabre note:

"The master's body!" roared the butler into the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry, madame, but I'm afraid we can't furnish it -- it's far too hot to touch this noon!"

What he really said was, "Yes...Yes...I'll see" (115).

Illusion and reality continue to seem intertwined after the butler waves them into the salon, for Nick and Gatsby come upon a tableau that parallels the opening scene of the Buchanans' dinner party in Chapter I. The darkened living room, "shadowed well with awnings" (115), resembles even more closely a circus tent in this episode, and once again, Daisy and Jordan are on display on the enormous white couch. At the first party they seemed to float in dreamy suspension, but now Nick has the opposite impression: looking like "silver idols" (115), they seem to "weigh down their own white dresses" (115, my emphasis). The change in imagery emphasizes a quality of oppressiveness about them, and by comparing them to silver idols, Nick introduces a suggestion of
artificiality, which will be joined by similar suggestions as the party progresses. Jordan's fingers are "powdered white over their tan" (115); Tom Buchanan greets Gatsby with "well-concealed dislike" (116); Jordan mockingly and insincerely objects "You forget there's a lady present" (116) when Daisy kisses Gatsby; and Daisy parades her little daughter to show her off -- and predictably dismisses the child after a few minutes of elaborate fuss. The theme continues when they drink down "nervous gayety with the cold ale" (118) at the lunch table, and culminates when Daisy tells Gatsby that he resembles "the advertisement of the man" (119).

In addition to artificiality, the atmosphere is marked by a sense of disconnectedness, disorder, unpredictability, and upheaval. Daisy is so worked up that she momentarily forgets the heat and begins to clog on the fireplace, she attempts to get her "absolute little dream" to admire Gatsby only to be rewarded with an inopportune demand of "Where's Daddy?" (117); and Tom's theories on the heavens, while mixed-up and comical, do inject a note of cosmic instability. On the verge of tears, Daisy cries out that "everything's so confused" (118), and Nick comments, "Her voice struggled on through the heat... molding its senselessness into forms" (119). The decision is made to go to New York, and there, as Nick's description emphasizes, the confusion reaches a peak:

The prolonged and tumultuous argument that ended by herding us into that room eludes me... The notion originated with Daisy's suggestion that we hire five bathrooms and take cold baths, and then assumed a more tangible form as "a place to have a mint julep." Each of us said over and over that it was a "crazy idea" -- we all talked at once to a baffled clerk and
thought, or pretended to think, that we were being very funny. (126)

Aside from conveying the tumult and confusion, Nick's words create a subtle but significant association between the guests at Gatsby's parties, whom he had once described as being "herded... along a short-cut from nothing to nothing" in an effort to stave off "too obtrusive fate" (108) -- and Jordan, Gatsby, the Buchanans, and himself, whose similar desperate denial of reality "herds" them into the Plaza for a cocktail party. In the carnival world he has depicted, Fitzgerald indicates again and again that Gatsby is not alone in his need for illusion.

But in this instance, the party is simply too much of a sham to hold reality at bay for very long, and the tensions and animosities that have been percolating all afternoon finally break out into the open. In the ensuing fracas, Tom and Gatsby compete for Daisy as if she were a prize, and they insist that Jordan and Nick remain to watch the whole spectacle, as though "it would be a privilege to partake vicariously of their emotions" (131). Tom eventually succeeds in re-winning his wife by unmasking his opponent and revealing Gatsby's hidden identity:

"She's not leaving me!" Tom's words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. "Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he'd put on her finger... You're one of the bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim -- that much I happen to know. I've made a little investigation into your affairs -- and I'll carry it further tomorrow."

"You can suit yourself about that, old sport," said Gatsby steadily.

"I found out what your 'drug-stores' were." He turned to us and spoke rapidly. "He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drugstores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts." (134)
Just before these words, Daisy had insisted, although with a "visible effort" (134), that she would leave Tom, but the exposé of the riskiness of Gatsby's "stunts" completely weakens her resolve. She switches back to Tom and the security his old-money heritage represents, and the tawdry drama effectively puts an end to Gatsby's dream: "only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undauntedly, toward the lost voice across the room" (135).

In the midst of all the hostilities, Nick glances over at Jordan Baker and sees, in a significant detail, that she had "begun to balance an invisible but absorbing object on her chin" (135). Since almost any gesture of studied disinterest would have served, Fitzgerald's decision to describe Jordan in terms of her performing-seal-routine can be seen as a deliberate reminder of the carnival theme. The theme picks up again when Tom, with "magnanimous scorn" (136), tells Gatsby to take Daisy back to East Egg. He emphasizes that they should take Gatsby's car, which calls to mind his description of that conspicuously gaudy, cream-colored, nickel-plated automobile -- just before coming to New York, Tom had described it as a "circus wagon" (121).

The presence of carnival imagery even in the luncheon-Plaza episode is perhaps best described by a passage from Robert Emmet Long's study, *The Achieving of The Great Gatsby*:

> The scenic and dramatic development of *The Great Gatsby* helps give the work its sharply defined immediacy, but it is only one of the strategies of Fitzgerald's art. The novel develops, as importantly, through an elaboration of imagery, often as motif, in patterns of recurrence. (132)
The final social gathering completes one such pattern. In one party after another, Fitzgerald's imagery has evoked the garish sparkle, lurid meretriciousness, and unnatural distortion of the carnival, and in doing so, has unified the novel's social gatherings and provided an artistic underpinning to the novel's social commentary. Clearly, a carnival mentality informs the standards and pastimes of "that slender riotous island" (4). The repeated subversion of the dizzy glamour of those standards and pastimes -- the insistent underscoring of their tawdry shallowness -- reinforces Fitzgerald's critique of America and the modern age.

As a forum for festivities, the carnival does have tremendous attraction, as Fitzgerald well knew. One of his most explicit uses of the motif can be found in the essay "Early Success" from The Crack-Up, where he recalls, from the vantage point of 1937, the lifestyle he had chosen at the height of his celebrity as the chronicler of the Jazz Age: "...I had fair years to waste, years that I can't honestly regret, in seeking the eternal Carnival by the Sea" (89-90). Yet such tones of romantic nostalgia are only part of the mood of the essay, for Fitzgerald reveals in "Early Success" much the same kind of mixture of attitude toward the carnival as he had twelve years earlier in The Great Gatsby. He celebrates the capacity of youthful illusion to turn life into a great gaudy spree, but at the same time, his discussion resonates with the experience of the sense of loss that comes of thinking of life as a carnival: "...this article is about that first wild wind of success and the delicious mist it brings with it. It is a short and precious time -- for when the mist rises in a few weeks, or in a few months, one finds that the very best is over" (86). That same
understanding of the price of a carnival ethic can be found in his masterpiece, for in *The Great Gatsby*, the relentless pursuit of amusement, the rejection of responsibility, the disregard for order, the allegiance to illusion, and the surrender to artifice are not only pervasive -- they also lead, inexorably, to the scene in the Plaza and its aftermath.
Notes


2 Falassi states that "Rites of reversal through symbolic inversion drastically represent the mutability of people, culture, and life itself. Significant terms which are in binary opposition to the normal life of a culture are inverted. Sex roles are inverted in masquerade with males dressing as females and females dressing as males, social roles with masters serving their serfs. Sacred and profane spaces are also used in reverse" (4).


Works Cited


Works Consulted


VITA

Maura Kathryn Mahoney