The Great Gatsby: An Unusual Case of Mate Poaching

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel, The Great Gatsby, features mating problems with obvious bearing on fitness. Characters wrestle with issues ranging from mate selection and retention to infidelity and desertion. Competition among men for women’s sexual attention and loyalty—and among women for men’s—occupies much narrative space: it plays a critical role in events and provokes violence, including fatalities. Impetus for the main action is provided by the unusual and elaborate mate-poaching scheme devised by the title character. Jay Gatsby’s protracted pursuit of an unavailable woman, a wife and mother who has been married to someone else for three years before the story opens, serves as raison d’être for the whole. The far more ordinary adultery dominating the secondary action provides necessary backdrop for Gatsby’s “long secret extravaganza,” designed to entice another man’s wife into an act of permanent mate switching.¹ There is evolutionary logic to his stunning display of fidelity and bold plan for reappropriation, moreover, even though his fixation on a woman he already has lost proves biologically counterproductive. From a Darwinian point of view, the self-deceptive mechanisms that enable him to overlook or deny the negative implications of his quest are fascinating. His long-term mating plan is based on creative falsification of social and temporal reality.

Tom and Daisy

Gatsby’s program for reclaiming his lost love entails disruption of her marriage to Tom Buchanan. That marriage represents mate choices following predictable patterns. The two come from comparable backgrounds in terms of status, wealth, and social milieu: prosperous families at the top of the social

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), ed. and rpt. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 115–16. All citations refer to the 1991 edition.
hierarchy. Similarities in their “values and interests,” together with shared “race, ethnicity, and religion,” reflect “the tendency for like people to mate.”² Tom’s family’s wealth is vaster than Daisy’s: his affluence is conspicuous even among the wealthy. Consequently he exercises great appeal in terms of women’s evolved preference for “resource-laden” men.³ Daisy’s physical beauty and social gifts are as striking as Tom’s wealth, ensuring her social success: she is “by far the most popular of all the young girls” in town; hordes of “excited young officers” find her desirable and seek her attention (59). With her youth and beauty (indicators of fertility), her resources, status, and popularity, she represents an extremely appealing package to men seeking a long-term mate.⁴ Tom represents an equally attractive package from the female perspective: in addition to great wealth, he possesses a muscular build and a dominant personality, buttressed by an aggressively masculine glamour lingering from his college football days.⁵ Tom’s and Daisy’s mate value, in sum, is similarly high: each has acquired a much sought-after, top-value spouse “of roughly equivalent desirability.”⁶

The shared interests of this couple appear to revolve around spending and displaying their great wealth: horses and stables, manorial estates, expensive automobiles, European journeys. Since Tom has—and needs—no regular employment, no identifiable objective or necessity dictates their activities. There is no apparent reason for their various comings and goings or their changes of residency: no discoverable cause, for instance, for their decision to leave Chicago for East Egg or, indeed, for having gone there in the first place, and nothing to keep them in the East. Nick observes that the Buchanans “spent a year in France, for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there, unrestfully” (9). Terms like drift and unrestful indicate that their existence is neither purposeful nor contented. During the Chicago period, according to Jordan Baker, they put in time partying with “hard drinking people,” “a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild” (61). The Buchanans congregate with idle people like themselves who “played polo and were rich together” (9). Being rich is, in effect, their vocation. Nick’s final pronouncement on Tom and Daisy is that they are “careless people” whose wealth has allowed them to cultivate a profound obliviousness to interests other than their own: “They smashed

² Buss, Evolution of Desire 36.
³ Ibid., 27.
⁴ Ibid., 51-60.
⁵ Ibid., 25, 39-40.
⁶ Ibid., 125.
up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness” (139). Thus he associates the Buchanans’ extreme wealth with a grotesquely inflated sense of entitlement, suggesting that a shared assumption of special privilege is what “kept them together” (139).

The Buchanans’ marriage has been troubled by adultery, readers discover, long before Gatsby appears on the scene. Tom’s apparently unlimited financial resources confer social privileges of many kinds, including easy access to short-term sexual partners. Readers learn from Jordan that Tom was caught in an extramarital fling with a hotel chambermaid just three months after he married Daisy. He had concealed the affair successfully from his wife, apparently, until he “ran into a wagon” by driving aggressively and “ripped a front wheel off his car.” Because “the girl who was with him” was injured, the accident was reported in a local newspaper (61). In addition to foreshadowing the violent role to be played by automobiles later in the story, this incident shows that from the very beginning of his marriage Tom is implementing a mixed reproductive strategy. That is, he combines long-term investment in a high-quality, long-term partner—and the children of that partnership—with opportunistic short-term affairs. When feasible, this is the optimal male strategy: it enables a man to dedicate paternal care and resources to the children of the best long-term mate he can acquire, maximizing their chances to survive and thrive; at the same time, he takes advantage of other mating opportunities, offering limited resources to his secondary partners. Typically he provides less support and care (in some cases none) to any offspring resulting from his peripheral, usually furtive, relationships. Since such offspring may survive even under less than ideal conditions, the extramarital dalliances tend to secure him a more substantial genetic legacy than would unwavering fidelity to one long-term mate, no matter how high her quality.7

Even after he acquires Myrtle Wilson as a steady mistress, Tom remains an avid womanizer: he continues to seek out new fitness-enhancing sexual opportunities. At one of Gatsby’s parties, for instance, he picks up a girl more or less under his wife’s nose: Daisy observes that she is “common but pretty” (83). The small sample provided to readers of Tom’s choice in extramarital partners—a hotel chambermaid, a garage owner’s wife, a “common” girl—illustrates the “relaxed standards” men typically apply in short-term involvements.8 Since they are making no enduring commitment and no major investment in

7 Ibid., 80-81; Dawkins, Selfish Gene 154.
8 Buss, Evolution of Desire, 78.
their temporary partners, they need not make high demands for sexual fidelity, genetic quality, or social status. As Buss observes, “men’s standards for sexual affairs reveal a precise strategy to gain sexual access to a variety of partners.”

In contrast to their preference in wives—who must demonstrate sexual reserve and fidelity—men seek short-term partners with sexual experience and high sex drive. Myrtle Wilson meets these specifications in all particulars. As a married woman, she is experienced. Her libido is notably active, and she gives off distinct indicators of sexual availability. Seething with “immediately perceptible vitality,” she is “sensuously” fleshy, “smouldering” (23). She responds to Tom Buchanan at their first meeting, strangers on a train, with physical arousal: “I was so excited” (31). She violates etiquette by sitting on Tom’s lap in front of Nick, and when Nick goes out for cigarettes she retreats to the bedroom with Tom—behavior clearly signaling ardency.

In addition to offering sexual favors, Myrtle makes a desirable mistress because of the very qualities rendering her unsuitable as a wife for a man like Tom. The social disparity between them enables Tom to please her with a relatively small financial investment. A mistress whose status and background were closer to Tom’s would be hard to come by, and if he did succeed in enticing a social equal into an affair he would be confronted with expensive tastes and high-class expectations. Myrtle’s distinctly lower socioeconomic position, contrastingly, induces her to admire Tom’s status and resources. She is delighted with the magazines, perfumes, face creams, and clothing he purchases for her, pleased with the apartment he has rented for their use. Proud of the tasteless furnishings he has permitted her to select, she feels “regal” when she enters their small love-nest (25). Given his wealth, Tom is easily able to afford the resources he chooses to spend on Myrtle. Her married state, and consequent need to conceal their affair from her husband, constitutes yet another advantage for Tom: he can count on her discretion because she is anxious to keep their relationship hidden from her spouse. Her limited education and experience render her naively vulnerable, in addition, to Tom’s two-faced evasion of future commitment: he keeps Myrtle happy by implying that he would like to marry her at some future date, even as he explains that his wife’s religion forbids divorce. Someone more nearly Tom’s social equal, a woman with worldly knowledge and fact-checking facility, would not be so easily put off.

9 Ibid., 79.
10 Ibid., 79.
Myrtle Wilson’s selection of Tom as an extramarital affair partner, like his selection of her, is strategically sound. Access to otherwise unobtainable material resources is “a key adaptive benefit” women stand to gain from casual liaisons. A research in evolutionary psychology indicates that women prefer temporary partners who lead “an extravagant lifestyle,” who “spend a lot of money on them,” proving “generous with their resources.” A man like Tom Buchanan, who belongs to an extremely small pool of the super-rich, finds it easy to exploit these preferences. He moves with assurance in privileged, upper class circles; Myrtle’s husband, in contrast, is the owner of a garage, a distinctly unprepossessing and “unprosperous” business. As his wife, Myrtle is forced to help out by pumping gas. Her stolen days with Tom in New York City offer temporary elevation from dirt and poverty into wealth and ease. Their relationship provides Myrtle with access, however limited, to Buchanan money, which procures goods and services she otherwise could not afford, and she clearly revels in this opportunity. Greedily she enumerates her plans for self-indulgent spending (a new dress, a wave, a massage); she makes impulse purchases (a puppy); she indulges her whims (riding in a lavender-colored taxicab).

A collateral benefit for Myrtle is the boost in self-esteem a woman typically enjoys when a man with “better financial prospects” and “more successful than her current partner” takes an interest in her. Dressed in one of the “elaborate” gowns Tom’s money has supplied, Myrtle assumes an air of “hauteur” (26). In her mind, her relationship with Tom has raised her social standing, and she enjoys playing the lady, mimicking the “high mincing” speech she associates with refinement and speaking contemptuously of service staff, people she now can imagine belong to “lower orders” than her own (26, 27). Being chosen by Tom, savoring a lifestyle far more luxurious than she has known before, increases her sense of self-worth: she is convinced, consequently, that her husband is socially beneath her (not “fit to lick my shoe”), not really “a gentleman” (30). Because a man with far more claim than her husband to the title of gentleman has offered her attention and gifts, she feels classy and important.

Myrtle also obtains from Tom “one of the most important benefits of an extramarital affair,” namely, sexual gratification. An obviously sensual woman, she finds Tom physically attractive, and she evidently carries on an active sex life with him. Descriptions of George Wilson as “spiritless” and

11 Ibid., 87.
12 Ibid., 86.
13 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 168.
14 Ibid., 170.
“anaemic” hint that his lack of vitality may extend into the bedroom; the childlessness of the Wilsons’ longstanding marriage (about eleven years) corroborates such speculation (22). Thus Myrtle may obtain direct reproductive benefits, consciously desired or not, from Tom. She is a woman “in the middle thirties” whose procreative potential is waning (23). Since her husband has failed “to deliver the reproductive resources that provide the raison d’être for long-term mating,” she has nothing to lose and much to gain—in terms of fitness—by testing her fertility with a different man.15

If pregnancy should ensue, she has options for obtaining paternal support from two men. One possibility is that George Wilson would accept the child as his. Another possibility is that pregnancy would bring the infidelity to light and break up the Wilsons’ marriage, in which case Tom Buchanan might provide Myrtle and the child with private financial support. Myrtle also may imagine that the prospect of a child would provide Tom with inducement to abandon his current wife and marry her.

Quite apart from the possibility of pregnancy, Myrtle harbors hopes, if not strong expectations, that her affair with Tom may lead to marriage. The opportunity to “trade up” for a higher-quality husband would vastly improve her socioeconomic circumstances and fitness prospects: the hope of realizing such benefits motivates much female infidelity.16 Unlike men, who lower their selection criteria when choosing short-term partners, women choose affair-partners using the same standards of evaluation they apply to potential husbands.17 Like many women involved with men of higher mate value than their current long-term partners, Myrtle would like to convert her lover into a husband. The dishonest explanation Tom gives for failing to divorce his current wife indicates that he is deceiving Myrtle “by feigning long-term intentions,” a tactic men often utilize when seeking short-term sexual partners.18 The true nature of his commitment is made plain in the violent quarrel that ends the party in the New York apartment, a quarrel triggered by Myrtle’s jealous resentment of Tom’s wife. When he forbids Myrtle to mention his wife’s name, striking her brutally after she fails to comply with his order, she surely knows that he places higher value on Daisy than on her. Tom has shown Myrtle, forcibly, that he does not consider her to be marriage material; indeed, she is so obviously inferior in

15 Buss, Evolution of Desire, 176.
16 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 166-69.
17 Buss, Evolution of Desire, 88.
18 “Men are aware that simulating commitment is an effective tactic for gaining access to short-term sex, and they admit to deceiving women by this means.” Ibid., 105.
his view that for her to utter Daisy’s name would constitute contamination. Confronted with these insulting realities, tellingly, Myrtle does not threaten to walk out; the other benefits Tom provides (i.e., other than long-term commitment) are sufficiently valuable to keep her in the relationship. Instead of protesting that she will not remain with a man who uses violence against her, she makes “despairing” efforts to shield her cherished upholstery, bought with Tom’s money, from the blood streaming copiously out of her broken nose (32). Clearly she intends to continue the affair along whatever lines Tom dictates, showing off her fancy furniture and clothing, playing Lady of the Manor in a tiny apartment.

The partners in this doubly adulterous relationship are motivated to carry on with it indefinitely (long enough, in any event, to make semi-permanent arrangements for their meetings), a clear indication that both are satisfied with the benefits it brings. They take some care to minimize potential costs, in particular by concealing Myrtle’s infidelity from her husband. Having used his wealth to attract a short-term partner, Tom also wields it effectively to deceive her husband. Offering to sell Wilson a nice car, presumably for eventual re-sale at a profit, he has a fine excuse for dropping in at the garage to arrange his meetings with Myrtle. There is distinct meanness in his proceedings, since he never does produce the promised vehicle. He keeps Wilson vacillating uncomfortably between anticipation and disappointment, overriding the latter’s feeble protests with bullying displays of social dominance. He takes advantage of Wilson’s poverty for his own ends, though he obviously could afford to invest the price of a car (or two or three) in order to lull husbandly suspicion. He seems to enjoy perpetrating a double deception, cheating Wilson financially as well as sexually. Derogating the rival he has duped so successfully (“he’s so dumb he doesn’t know he’s alive”), Tom expresses the contempt universally directed at a cuckolded husband (22).19

Tom takes less trouble to conceal his relationship with Myrtle from his wife, in part, perhaps, because women’s reaction to a partner’s infidelity tends to be less dramatic than men’s. For evolutionarily understandable reasons, women are less likely to respond with violence to infidelity and also are less likely to leave an unfaithful spouse. Reluctance to lose a husband’s support for herself and her offspring may motivate a woman to tolerate sexual straying,

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19 “Cuckolds are universally ridiculed.” A husband is disgraced by a wife’s sexual disloyalty; he suffers reputational damage and is considered “unmanly,” weak, and inadequate. Buss, Dangerous Passion, 52.
particularly if resources are not noticeably depleted and long-term commitment is not undermined.\textsuperscript{20} Women are not troubled, furthermore, by anything equivalent to the threats to paternal confidence men suffer when their wives betray them sexually. These realities notwithstanding, it is emphatically in a woman’s best interest to prevent her husband from cheating if she can. It is adaptive to avert possible loss of paternal care and resources, as well as potential damage to social reputation and self-esteem.\textsuperscript{21} The most significant danger of extramarital affairs, from a wife’s point of view, is the eventuality that a relationship intended to be casual may assume emotional importance, precipitating a husband’s defection from the marriage.\textsuperscript{22} Wives are likely, therefore, to use surveillance, recrimination, and a variety of guilt-inducing tactics to discourage and punish a husband’s infidelity. To avoid these unpleasant consequences, men engaging in extramarital escapades generally try to avoid detection.

Tom Buchanan’s attempts to deceive his wife are somewhat halfhearted and therefore only partly successful. He does not tell his wife about his relationship with Myrtle, certainly, nor does he mention the apartment he has rented in the city for purposes of adulterous dalliance. When Myrtle telephones his home, triggering Daisy’s suspicions and “impassioned” interrogation, he attempts, albeit futilely, to soothe her (15). His efforts to hide the existence of his “girl” from his wife prove inadequate principally because of his indiscreet public behavior: he has broadcast the affair by escorting Myrtle to “popular restaurants,” where he inevitably encounters people who know him (21). Instead of retreating in embarrassment from acquaintances, furthermore, he initiates “chatting” interaction (21). Although he stops short of introducing Myrtle, he is very evidently showing her off or, more accurately, showing off the fact that he has a mistress. The fact that “Tom’s got some woman in New York” is an open secret, a secret that no doubt has been relayed to his wife by acquaintances said to have “resented” Tom’s tasteless display of his extramarital conquest (15, 21). Despite the attendant costs (in the shape of wifely reproaches), he cannot resist demonstrating publicly that he possesses the power and resources to “gain access to the mates of lower status men.”\textsuperscript{23} As the anthropological record shows, men worldwide have competed to monopolize

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{20} Buss, \textit{Evolution of Desire}, 266-67.
\bibitem{21} Buss, \textit{Dangerous Passion}, 40.
\bibitem{22} Buss, \textit{Evolution of Desire}, 266.
\bibitem{23} Barbara Smuts, “Male Aggression Against Women: An Evolutionary Perspective,” in \textit{Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives}, ed. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 248.
\end{thebibliography}
women’s reproductive potential, and Tom delights in presenting himself as a winner in that age-old competition. He is convinced, with some justification, that the ability to attract and maintain two women simultaneously provides evidence of his material resources, social dominance, and masculine appeal. Advertising his sexual success, Tom intends to excite the envy and admiration of other men. His behavior indicates that he regards the consequences of his all-but-proclaimed infidelity as low-cost.

The most significant cost Tom could incur would be loss of his high-quality mate, and clearly he does not fear this. The fact that he has indulged in short-term affairs throughout their marriage no doubt bolsters Tom’s assumption that Daisy is willing, however reluctantly, to tolerate his sexual wandering. Having learned of Tom’s affair with a hotel chambermaid almost before the honeymoon was over, Daisy has had several years to come to terms with her husband’s persistent infidelity. Her behavior when Tom leaves her at supper, during Gatsby’s party, to pick up a girl at another table shows that she has hardened herself to his womanizing. “Genially” she tells her husband to “go ahead,” adding sarcastically that she will lend him her “little gold pencil” if he wants to “take down any addresses” of potential affair partners (82-83). In this exchange, both parties demonstrate a mixture of self-assertion and accommodation. He picks up a girl while attending a social event with his wife but shows a modicum of respect for her by creating a veneer of excuse and concealment, pretending he wants to listen to “a fellow’s ... funny stuff” rather than crudely announcing that he is off to conduct a short-term seduction (82). Daisy refrains from outright condemnation or threat but conveys displeasure, obliquely, with sarcastic needling. The double-edged offer to loan Tom her “little gold pencil,” though superficially pleasant and forthcoming, proclaims aloud her awareness of Tom’s extramarital activities, letting him know that she is not a pitiful dupe. There is a here we go again tone to her sarcasm, however, that tells listeners she is not contemplating radical action in response to Tom’s dalliances.

Daisy remains a worthy antagonist in their ongoing marital dueling, for she commands impressive verbal weapons. In the embarrassment caused by Myrtle’s disruptive telephone call, earlier that summer, Daisy torments Tom in the presence of guests with ironic praise of the “romantic” evening, extolling with mocking warmth the inspiring “home influence” she and Tom

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24 Felicia Pratto, “Sexual Politics: The Gender Gap in the Bedroom, the Cupboard, and the Cabinet,” in Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives, ed. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206-207.
can provide for Jordan (16, 18). The “tense gayety” with which she couches her obliquely accusatory comments renders them especially effective (16). They are also unanswerable: Tom is forced “miserably” into a corner by Daisy’s aggressive baiting (16). Punishing her husband with barbed wit rather than tearful pleading, Daisy asserts confidence in her own desirability and worth—confidence a husband’s disloyalty often undermines. To counter behavior she cannot prevent, she demeans her husband in front of an audience with her witty put-downs. Because he never acknowledges his affairs to his wife or in her presence, he is unable to make any rebuttal to her derogatory innuendos. In this way, she enforces a cost: she compels him to pay for the advantages he derives from his adultery with psychological discomfort and social humiliation. The couple has reached a stand-off. He exercises sexual freedom, which she tolerates but resents; she retaliates with punitive verbal assaults, souring as much as she can the pride and pleasure he takes in his extramarital escapades.

Gatsby and Daisy: Phase I

With its classic patterns of mate choice and mutual accommodation, including successful implementation of a mixed sexual strategy on the part of the husband, the Buchanan marriage aptly illustrates a number of Darwinian principles. Indeed, the evolutionarily predictable features of Tom and Daisy’s relationship may help to explain why there is little about it to rivet readers’ attention. As Brian Boyd points out, “no one savors stories confined to the banal and expected”: audiences respond, rather, to “the striking,” that is, to “unusual characters or events” (115). Readers’ interest also can be sparked by identification with characters or their predicaments, but Fitzgerald’s presentation of the “dully simple” partners in the Buchanan marriage is not calculated to evoke empathy. Their shared interests and values are ignoble; Tom’s adulteries and Daisy’s “sophisticated” tolerance of them put neither spouse in an admirable light; as the Other Woman, Myrtle Wilson is too coarse and acquisitive to garner sympathy (17). Nobody in this sexual triangle exhibits a trace of appealing eccentricity. The situation is unhappy without arousing pity, sordid without compensatory titillation. It takes the intrusion of an

25 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 40.
26 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories, 115.
27 Robert Ian Scott, “Entropy vs. Ecology in The Great Gatsby,” in Gatsby: Major Literary Characters, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House: 1991), 90.
outsider to render this particular constellation of intra- and intersexual conflict interesting. That outsider, the mysterious Jay Gatsby, proves sufficiently unusual in his motives, goals, and methods to serve as a magnet for readers’ curiosity. In his pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, Gatsby transforms ordinary adaptive strategies into a fascinating quest.

The first phase of Gatsby’s romance with Daisy Fay, in the summer of 1917, clearly indicates how and why this particular woman comes to exercise such a powerful hold on him. Emerging from a distinctly lower-middle-class milieu, “a penniless young man without a past,” the twenty-five-year-old Gatsby is enchanted by the physical beauty, social poise, high status, and material prosperity of eighteen-year-old Daisy (116). The only term he finds adequate to explain the impression she makes of upper-class untouchability is *nice*: she is “the first ‘nice’ girl he had ever known” (116). Intangible but unassailable class lines—“indiscernible barbed wire”—normally would have prevented their acquaintance, but wartime military service provides him with the “invisible cloak of his uniform” (116). Exploiting the anonymity it provides, he woos a girl whose mate value exceeds his own astronomically. It is this vast disparity in their relative mate value that renders her “excit-ingly desirable” to him, sealing his fixation (116). Given his unprepossessing upbringing, the trappings of Daisy’s prosperous life seem almost magical: her “beautiful house” exudes “ripe mystery,” promising “gay and radiant activities” (116). The fact that “many men had already loved Daisy” further ratifies her worth.28 “Daisy embodies the idea of perfection for Gatsby, an almost unapproachable ideal of social success and self-realization,” as Peter L. Hays observes.29 To win her would be the stuff of fairy tales, with Gatsby playing the role of a peasant chosen by a princess. Their romance illustrates, as Bert Bender states, “the female’s power to select the superior male and the male’s struggle to be selected.”30 To marry Daisy would prove fitness-enhancing for the young Gatsby in every possible way. In addition to the promise of fertility and good genes, she would bring him status and prosperity: his children would be born into upper-class privilege and enjoy the advantages of elite social networks. Gatsby is not concentrating overtly on these fitness benefits,
obviously, nor is it necessary that he do so: “the Darwinian evaluation of a
mate needn’t be consciously Darwinian.”\textsuperscript{31} The operation of proximate mecha-
nisms serves to excite his desires and cement his devotion.

Initially, Gatsby’s objective is short-term, “to take what he could and go,”
but the benefits of temporary sexual access are limited compared with those
he stands to gain from long-term commitment (116). Daisy—marriage to
Daisy—becomes a “grail,” a goal to which he dedicates himself with unwaver-
ing, quasi-religious fervor (117). The implied comparison of Daisy’s reproduc-
tive potential to the golden chalice of ancient legends, imbued with mystically
restorative powers, highlights the evolutionary basis of her “gleaming” signif-
icance to Gatsby (117). Her mate value so far exceeds his that obtaining her
as a wife would represent fulfillment of all but impossible dreams. It is not
inexperience with women or an inability to attract them, as Nick explains, that
causes Gatsby to devote all energies to the exclusive pursuit of Daisy: “he knew
women early and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them”
(77). It is her difference from all the others, her incomparably “golden” worth,
that renders her irresistible (94). Discovering to his surprise that he “loved”
this uniquely desirable girl, and without conscious intention has “committed
himself” to her, Gatsby illustrates the critical role of emotions as “evolution’s
executioners” (117, 116).\textsuperscript{32}

His courtship of Daisy during their first “month of love” seems to be
moving toward a successful outcome: she yields to him sexually and emo-
tionally, declaring that she is “in love” with him (117). To win her regard,
however, he has relied on deception: he has “taken her under false pre-
tences,” allowing “her to believe that he was a person from much the same
strata as herself … fully able to take care of her” (116). Had war service not
intervened, readers must surmise, his hopes would have been crushed when
Daisy’s family began looking into his antecedents and asking how he planned
to support a wife. He assumes, using evolutionarily sound reasoning, that
revelation of his origins and circumstances would extinguish her dawning
attachment to him. Being called to duty abroad rescues him from damag-
ing disclosures. He does not appear to appreciate this escape for what it is,
however, and he continues to engage in significant self-deception as he cor-
responds with Daisy and encourages her to count on their eventual marriage.
Even if he had returned to Louisville sooner, in time to head off her marriage

\textsuperscript{31} Wright, \textit{Moral Animal}, 95.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 88.
to another man, he could not have carried out the intentions he has confided to her. He has won promotion in the military but has had no opportunity to improve his financial situation; thus he still is in no position to conduct an open courtship. He is not planning an elopement, after all: he wants to marry with all attendant ceremony and full backing from her family. This could not have occurred: investigation and unmasking would have been inevitable. Gatsby seems not to have faced these discouraging facts, deceiving himself, in fact, almost as much as he deceives Daisy.

Because she breaks faith with him by marrying another man before his return from Europe, Gatsby’s deceptive self-presentation is not challenged: humiliating revelations are averted. There are evolutionarily plausible explanations for Daisy’s failure to wait for the lover to whom she evidently has made private promises. According the somewhat vague timetable provided by Jordan, Daisy waits about a year after Gatsby’s departure before resuming an active social life, a substantial time period in the life of a vivacious eighteen-year-old. There are additional signs that she has made a serious emotional investment in the relationship with Gatsby, including an abortive attempt to travel East to see him off to France. Her last-minute, drunken insistence that she has changed her mind about marrying Tom (“tell ‘em all Daisy’s change’ her mine”) provides more proof of attachment, even though she allows herself to be dissuaded from jilting Tom at the altar (61). Her commitment to Gatsby seems genuine, though wavering; she fails to sustain it over time not so much because she lacks strength of purpose as because there are so many factors operating to undermine her loyalty.

The first undermining factor is secrecy: apparently the couple has confided the seriousness of their intentions to no one. This secrecy is doubtless a byproduct of Gatsby’s dissimulation: he would not want to expose himself to scrutiny by Daisy’s family in his present “penniless” state. Daisy’s parents sponsor her début the year following his departure, a social launching that would be pointless if she already were affianced: clearly her parents do not so regard her. She is subject, accordingly, to “the pressure of the world outside” (i.e., the world outside her unacknowledged relationship with Jay Gatsby) to conduct herself like a typical débutante. As an eligible young woman awaiting proposals, she is expected to remain active in the courtship arena (118). She is approximately nineteen years

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33 Gatsby leaves Louisville in October of 1917, and “by the next autumn” (1918) Daisy is “as gay as ever.” In June 1919, approximately a year and a half after the romance with Gatsby, she marries Tom Buchanan. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 60.
old at the time of her début: reproductively considered, she has reached the height of her mate value. Friends and relations expect her to take advantage of present opportunities, which are unlikely to increase with the passage of time. Daisy herself appears to be motivated by both biological and social pressures: “Something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately” (118). From an evolutionary psychological perspective, Daisy’s unease may be explained at least in part as reproductive anxiety: she wonders if she is wasting her prime fertile years waiting for a man whose continued absence may cause her to miss out on optimal mating options. When the immensely rich, socially dominant Tom Buchanan appears on the scene, she chooses not to pass up the “wholesome bulkiness” of “his person and his position” (118). Ending any possible worry about decreasing mating options and declining mate value, the decision to accept Tom brings “a certain relief” even if it also triggers “a certain struggle” with lingering tenderness for her absent lover (118).

Thus Tom’s obvious desirability as a husband is the final factor in Daisy’s decision to wait no longer for Gatsby. Despite justifiable confidence in her own high value, she is “flattered” by the attentions of this extraordinarily well qualified suitor (118). She is beautiful, personable, and prosperous, to be sure, but Tom’s family is far richer than hers and his social position accordingly more powerful. His courtship gratifies her, a clear indication that she judges his mate value to be at least as high as hers. This equivalency not only explains her reasons for choosing Tom, as discussed earlier, it provides significant motivation for withdrawal from a prior commitment. Although Gatsby has given her a false “sense of security” by persuading her that his background is “much the same” as hers, he has provided no evidence that he commands resources or status markedly better than her own (116). Taking for granted that her future husband will come from an elite socioeconomic milieu, Daisy is not unduly excited by the prospect of a husband “fully able to take care of her”: this would be her minimal expectation (116). Unlike Gatsby, whose long-continuing commitment is fueled by the prospect of winning a woman whose mate value far exceeds his own, Daisy believes Gatsby’s mate value approximates hers; so far as she knows, his social and financial circumstances are no different from those of her many other suitors. Consequently her ideas about a shared future with Gatsby lack the element of magical promise that so enthralls him.

Daisy is not dazzled by Tom’s desirable qualities as Gatsby is by hers, but she is impressed by what Tom has to offer, sufficiently so, given the other pressures she is experiencing, to make an immediate mating decision. She decides to take the
bird in hand. If Gatsby had managed to make a timely reappearance, “his presence beside her” might have influenced her to reject the rival candidate, but the problem of Gatsby’s falsified background must still have prevented their marriage (118). Daisy cannot know that, of course, but viewed from any angle her decision to break her commitment to him is self-protective; it may not strike observers as particularly admirable, but it is strategically sensible. By accepting Tom instead of waiting for Gatsby, Daisy locks in very real benefits. In addition to securing financially and socially superior resources for herself and potential offspring, she avoids the risks inherent in postponing long-term mating and reproduction.

Error management theory helps to show the evolutionary logic that guides her: based on mostly unconscious calculations, she has identified “the less costly error.”34 She has more to lose, potentially, by waiting for Gatsby than she does by marrying Tom. The potential cost to marrying Tom is loss of a perhaps more faithful, more agreeable partner—a loss likely to affect her personal happiness more than her direct fitness. (Natural selection serves “genetic proliferation,” alas, not happiness, as evolutionary research repeatedly demonstrates.35) A decision to refuse Tom and await Gatsby’s return, contrastingly, might for a variety of reasons constitute a more costly error. Gatsby’s absence might be indefinitely prolonged, or he might not reappear at all. While waiting for him, she might pass up never-to-be-repeated mating opportunities, that is, she might not be wooed again by a man offering as many matrimonial advantages as Tom Buchanan. As a result of waiting, she might delay having children longer than she otherwise would, possibly imperiling or reducing her lifetime reproductive success. Gatsby, once returned, might prove to be a less desirable long-term mate than she imagines. This last consideration, as readers know, is not a risk but a certainty: if Gatsby had arrived in Louisville on schedule and proceeded with his courtship, Daisy necessarily would have discovered his social and financial liabilities. The investigative process and consequent termination of the relationship likely would have proven socially disadvantageous as well as emotionally painful: costs she would have paid by maintaining her commitment to Gatsby.

### Gatsby and Daisy: Phase II

Once Daisy has married Tom, the result of mating decisions influenced for better or for worse by evolved adaptations, Gatsby’s courtship of her might

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34 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 76.
35 Wright, Moral Animal, 211.
be supposed to be finished. Instead of moving on to new romantic options, however, he defies ordinary expectations by continuing to pursue the woman who has thrown him over. Gatsby’s long, secret campaign to repossess the woman he has lost constitutes the heart of the novel, captivating readers with its boldness and creativity. The strangeness of his project, together with the unlikelihood of its success, proves irresistibly intriguing. The first unusual feature of his three-year courtship is the decision to disappear from Daisy’s life. Unlike many other men in similar circumstances, in life or in literature (e.g., Goethe’s Werther), he does not seek meetings or correspondence with her. This is a clever tactic. He avoids presenting himself in the guise of cringing hanger-on or emasculated loser—male types women reject as mates. He does risk being forgotten (a risk he probably does not consider substantial, given the intensity of their 1917 affair), but by withdrawing entirely from her attention he prepares the way for surprise. Once his elaborate preparations are complete, he can re-enter Daisy’s life with flair. He can hope to exert a doubly potent appeal, combining the allure of novelty with the comfort of the familiar. He will burst into her life with glorious suddenness, an ideally re-invented version of a man she already has found worthy of love. Wizard-like, he plans to create a richly “magical world” in which, temporarily at least, “appearance becomes social reality.”

The most important element in Gatsby’s self-transformation is the acquisition of material resources. To meet Daisy’s upper-class expectations and to compete effectively with her enormously rich husband, he rightly judgements that he needs to amass extraordinary wealth. During the three post-military years of separation from Daisy, his energies are directed toward this end. He judges, in addition, that his newly acquired resources must be conspicuously displayed. Since Daisy rejected him to marry a man whose expensive lifestyle, in Nick’s words, “rather took your breath away,” Gatsby assumes that to win her attention he must flaunt his prosperity, proving to Daisy and to the world that he has outdone all possible rivals (8). With his European-style mansion, special-order automobile, and fancy parties featuring “celebrated people,” he is targeting the universal female concern with resources and utilizing typically masculine show-and-tell tactics (71). Men “go to great lengths to display their resources to attract mates,” Buss points out, and Gatsby is determined to make a lavish

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36 Buss discusses women’s preference in potential mates for traits indicating dominance and confidence, *Evolution of Desire*, 107-109.

37 Jeffrey Hart, “Anything Can Happen: Magical Transformation in *The Great Gatsby*,” *South Carolina Review* 25, no. 2 (1993): 39, 40.
statement with the fortune he has accrued in his protracted mating effort. Discussing this aspect of Gatsby’s courtship, Philip McGowan argues that Gatsby underlines his financial metamorphosis by exploiting the transformative power of money, creating “spectacles and entertainments,” a “lifestyle of illusion.” As “the circus master” and the “carnivaliser of reality,” he attempts to infuse his newly acquired wealth with magical potential and thus render it even more attractive.

Gatsby plans his reunion with Daisy carefully, ensuring that she will see his “enormous” dwelling, and thus grasp the extent of his wealth, at their first meeting (69). Taking her on a tour of his “Marie Antoinette music rooms and restoration salons,” the “period bedrooms” and “sunken baths,” he shows off his exquisite possessions in loving detail (71). Moving deliberately from public to private portions of his home, he ends the tour in his bedroom, tacitly inviting Daisy to associate his riches with sexuality and mating opportunities. He shows her his “toilet set of pure dull gold” and is delighted when she immediately begins to smooth her hair with his brush, a subtle sign that she is responding positively to this spectacular show of resources (72). The scene reaches its well-known climax when he piles his high-priced British shirts before her in “many-colored disarray” (72). There is sound calculation (conscious or not) behind this display of luxurious garments. Evolutionary anthropologists have observed that women are attracted, across cultures, to “costly” apparel: they are sensitive to “the expense and high status of clothing.” Intimate and extravagant, the “soft rich heap” of Gatsby’s “beautiful shirts” moves Daisy to stormy tears (72). In a “symbolic sexual act,” he spreads out for her admiration the magnificent apparel that has clothed his own body, triggering an emotionally intense reaction that promises to lead, as in fact it does, to a romantically charged sexual affair.

Showing off the splendid things his money has bought, Gatsby overpowers Daisy with the resources he has acquired: he has acquired them, indeed, with the intention of creating precisely this reaction. He also hopes to impress her with the tenacity of his devotion. Women seeking long-term mates value commitment almost as much as resources: a man must demonstrate

38 Buss, Evolution of Desire, 99.
39 Philip McGowan, “The American Carnival of The Great Gatsby,” Connotations 13, no. 1-2 (2003/2004): 147.
40 Buss, Evolution of Desire, 101.
41 Ross Posnock, “A New World, Material Without Being Real: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism in The Great Gatsby,” in Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 208. Posnock accurately describes Daisy’s sobbing response to Gatsby’s shirts as essentially “orgasmic,” 208.
willingness to invest his money, time, and energy reliably in his chosen mate and their common offspring. Displays of generosity and kindness typically are interpreted as signs of commitment, for example, as is emotional supportive ness.\textsuperscript{42} “Persistence in courtship,” above all, tends to persuade a woman that her suitor is “interested in more than casual sex” and envisions a shared long-term future.\textsuperscript{43} While guiding Daisy on the long anticipated tour through his home, consequently, Gatsby provides evidence of his long-term fidelity as well as of his astounding wealth. He makes a point of showing her his collection of newspaper stories featuring her name and picture: “a lot of clippings—about you” (73). Gatsby’s surprising re-emergence and renewed courtship prove initially successful: Daisy responds positively to discovery of his secret, unwavering devotion. He offers a combination of loyalty and riches sufficient to lure her into an extramarital romance of some intensity: she visits Gatsby “quite often—in the afternoons” through what remains of the summer (88).

\textbf{Gatsby and Daisy: Phase III}

Although he gains Daisy’s sexual attention, Gatsby fails to achieve his long-range purpose, which is to convert their affair into marriage. There are two important reasons for his failure: the strength of the Buchanans’ marital bond is one; his confusion of wealth with status is the other. As noted earlier, Daisy’s marriage to Tom is based on important commonalities. Their shared socioeconomic background and upper-class concerns have lent stability to the union despite the friction caused by Tom’s infidelities; shared parental commitment to their child provides another stabilizing element. When Daisy confides to Nick, early on, that she’s had a “very bad time” being married to Tom and has grown “pretty cynical about everything,” Nick is struck by “the basic insincerity” of her complaints (17). Instead of taking action to change her situation, she appears to derive smug enjoyment from her “sophisticated” disillusionment with marriage and “everything” (17). Paradoxically, as Nick suggests, Daisy’s dissatisfactions seem to solidify her bond with Tom. Their jaded, been-there-done-that sense of superiority qualifies them for membership in “a rather distinguished secret society,” a small circle composed, presumably, of wealthy and “cynical” social peers (17). Much later in the novel, Nick attests again to the robustness of the Buchanan’s marital tie when he describes the scene he observes in their

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\item \textsuperscript{42} Buss, \textit{Evolution of Desire}, 102-104.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 102.
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kitchen (following the dramatic face-off between Gatsby and Tom and the fatal accident to Myrtle). It is a quiet tableau. Tom is “talking intently,” covering Daisy’s hand with his in a gesture that seems half-affectionate, half-possessive (113). Not only do the two of them radiate a “natural intimacy,” they look as if they are “conspiring together” (113). The image of Daisy and Tom as co-conspirators supports Nick’s understanding of their marriage as a durable alliance created to serve overlapping self-interests and protect elitist privilege.

Given this marital background, it is not surprising that Daisy crumbles quickly during the showdown between her lover and her husband: she refuses to commit herself to the new man in her life. Jolted out of her everyday boredom by Gatsby’s spectacular reappearance in her life, she evidently has accepted his vision of permanent togetherness as a titillating fantasy rather than as a serious plan. More bluntly put, she views him as an affair-partner rather than as a potential husband. She is satisfied with the short-term benefits their romance supplies. In addition to sexual pleasure, she obtains a terrific boost to her self-esteem. Gatsby’s five years of devotion validate, in the most flattering fashion, her desirability. She may view his besotted devotion as gratifying payback for Tom’s many infidelities, but she is not prepared to abandon the security of her marriage. Nick’s interpretation of her behavior during the confrontation between her husband and her lover is that “she realized at last what she was doing—and as though she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all” (103).

Tom’s response to the threat Gatsby poses is calculated to make Daisy understand the full implications of the mate switch Gatsby is proposing: he tells her just how risky life with “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” would be (101). He concentrates his mate-retention efforts on derogating his rival, a tactic commonly employed by members of both sexes against competitors. Tom exposes Gatsby’s lack of social status and upper-class connections, making Daisy realize that her lover is not her kind. He offers information about Gatsby’s shady business dealings, discreditable associates, and possibly criminal enterprises. Daisy’s upstart suitor is “a bootlegger” and “a common swindler,” Tom sneeringly asserts; Gatsby belongs to the class of people who deliver “the groceries to the back door” (104, 102). Daisy is “staring terrified,” Nick observes, as Tom makes these damning accusations (105). Not only is her image of Gatsby irretrievably damaged, she recognizes that marriage to him would take her out of the privileged socioeconomic milieu in which she has always lived. The safety

44 Ibid., 97-98.
net provided by high status, social influence, and prestigious connections would be lost to her if she left Tom for this “Mr. Nobody.”

Listening to Tom's angry denunciations with increasing “panic,” Gatsby does not fully realize why he is losing Daisy (104). From the beginning he recognized the vast difference in class between Daisy and himself (that difference was, indeed, an important component in her appeal for him), but “now foolishly he believes that the money he has earned erases much of that social gap.”45 He has planned to win her back with a splendid show of wealth, but from the very beginning, unbeknownst to him, his plan had a fatal flaw: wealth alone does not guarantee entree into elite social circles. It is true that material resources almost always are associated with social prestige, but in the highest echelons of society it takes more than one generation, typically, for the nouveau riche to win upper-class status. Nick's description of differences between the “raw” splendor of West Egg, where Gatsby has taken up residence, and the more sedately “fashionable” East Egg, where the Buchanans have bought property, points to the class barriers Gatsby must encounter in his pursuit of a Daisy Buchanan (8).46 Notable dissimilarities in their social training and acquired tastes signal a host of more profound dissimilarities in behavior, motivation, association, and assumption. By East Egg standards, Gatsby's display of wealth is garish. His home, an imitation of a European hotel, is pretentious; his pink suit is noxiously flashy; his parties are spectacles of “many-keyed commotion” (81). Tom Buchanan, a representative of Old Money, drives an expensive but conservative vehicle (a blue coupé), while the newly rich Gatsby takes pride in his ostentatiously designed nickel-and-cream car, “swollen” with “triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields” (51). Its rococo embellishments and “monstrous” size clearly indicate that it is the property of a man untutored in upper-class understatement: Tom contemptuously labels it a “circus wagon” (51, 94). Since Gatsby never recognizes the imperfect overlap between wealth and status, he does not understand that his social origins present an insurmountable obstacle to fulfillment of his dreams. Tom's disclosures only confirm Daisy's increasingly negative response to the “raw vigor” of Gatsby's West Egg style: during the one party she attends at his home, her upper-class sensibilities are “offended” and “appalled” (84).

45 Hays, “Oxymoron in The Great Gatsby,” 319.
46 W. T. Lhamon, Jr. discusses Fitzgerald’s presentation of class in relation to money, identifying Gatsby as a novel “clearly establishing profoundly different groups of people in America, characterized by their relative access to a broad notion of power.” “The Essential Houses of The Great Gatsby,” in Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 175.
Derogation is not the only tactic Tom employs during the confrontation scene; he also attempts to reactivate his wife’s loyalty by presenting himself and their marriage in the most favorable possible light. Despite evidence that she has become emotionally and sexually involved with another man, his jealousy does not take the form of aggression against her. He concentrates on driving away the interloper rather than on punishing Daisy for her infidelity. His goal, clearly, is to retain her as his wife, which indicates his awareness of her high mate value. He is unlikely to be able to replace her with a long-term mate of equivalent value—or, at any rate, not easily. Readers can only speculate about his probable response if Daisy had become pregnant in late summer or early autumn. Nick runs into Tom in late October and there is no mention then of a pregnancy: thus Tom’s wish to keep his wife is not tested by any question of paternal confidence. The only threat he makes against Daisy is a warning, couched in pseudo-loving terms, that in future her activities will be more strictly monitored and, perhaps, limited. “I’m going to take better care of you from now on,” he tells her, implying more attention and nurturing on his part but also more rigorous mate guarding (104).

In a compelling show of masculine self-confidence, Tom goes on to assure everyone present that he and Daisy love each other.⁴⁷ He reaffirms his enduring commitment to her (“in my heart I love her all the time”), reminding her that he has always “come back” to her after “a spree” of casual infidelity (103). He attempts to rekindle warmth by reminding her of tender moments in their shared past. He tries hard, in sum, to capitalize on women’s adaptive preference for men who offer them attention and caring as well as resources. Buss observes that potentially defecting partners often respond favorably to “displays of love.”⁴⁸ Shrewdly, too, Tom indicates that he is willing to excuse her affair with Gatsby as a temporary lapse in judgment instead of condemning it as culpable disloyalty: “sometimes she gets foolish ideas in her head and doesn’t know what she’s doing” (102). Finally, he dismisses Gatsby’s five-year devotion to Daisy as a “presumptuous little flirtation” (105). He belittles Gatsby’s dedication, at the same time reiterating his own marital commitment. Astutely employing a combination of defensive and offensive tactics, he wards off a serious mate-poaching attempt.

Charged though it is with emotions inspired by sexual competition and conflict, the scene in the hotel room remains relatively pacific: all the aggression

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⁴⁷ Buss explains that men often make displays of bravado and self-confidence in order to attract mates. Among other things, such displays signal “status and resources,” criteria of obvious importance in the showdown taking place between the high-status Tom Buchanan and his social-upstart rival. Evolution of Desire, 107-108.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 191, 192.
is verbal. Escalation of jealousy into violence is provoked by events occurring in the sexual triangle dominating the secondary action: George-Myrtle-Tom. Coincidently, George Wilson has “gotten wised up” to his wife’s infidelity around the same time Tom Buchanan begins to suspect Daisy’s interest in Gatsby (96). Unlike Tom, George doesn’t know the identity of his wife’s paramour. Since he, too, is determined to retain his mate, Wilson plans to “get her away” from the unknown man’s vicinity by taking her permanently to a distant state, “whether she wants to or not” (96). Until he can make arrangements for this move, he has locked her up. This is a much more physically coercive form of mate guarding than the supervision with which Tom threatens Daisy: Wilson has forcibly imprisoned his wife. He engages in punitive shaming, additionally, telling her that “God knows” what she’s done and implying that she will suffer otherworldly retribution for her adultery (124). When Myrtle is fatally struck by the conspicuous yellow car, Wilson assumes that she has been purposefully run down by its driver; he further concludes that the driver is Myrtle’s lover, who now deliberately has murdered her. In Wilson’s view, this man has deprived him of his wife twice over: first he enticed her into sexual infidelity and “then he killed her” (123). Rendered almost “incoherent” with grief and rage, Wilson can think only of finding and slaying the man who has committed this assault on his fitness: a sexual interloper who first appropriated and then destroyed reproductive resources in which Wilson has proprietary interest.

Wilson’s vengefulness exemplifies the “jealous violence,” up to and including homicide, frequently “directed toward same-sex rivals.” He can act on his murderous impulse only with Tom Buchanan’s cooperation, in this instance, and he gets it. Following up on Tom’s connection with the yellow car, Wilson learns Gatsby’s name and duly kills him. Using Wilson as a tool to kill the man who sought to usurp his own wife, Tom achieves a more violent, more risk-laden vengeance than he himself was willing to undertake. Without realizing that he is acting on Tom’s account as well as his own, Wilson permanently removes a contender for Daisy’s affection. Thus Tom benefits from his tacit complicity in murder. Had he not been killed, Gatsby doubtless would have continued his intrusion into the Buchanan marriage, an ongoing source of aggravation, if not serious worry, to Tom. (Gatsby’s all-night vigil outside the Buchanan home, together with his comments to Nick about a probable call from Daisy, suggests

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49 Buss discusses the prevalence of “dramatic” mate-guarding tactics historically and cross-culturally, noting that women have been concealed and confined in many societies in order to “prevent their contact with potential sexual partners.” Ibid., 136.

50 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 111, 119.
that he still has not given up all hope of winning her back.) Tom has yet another motive for helping Wilson: because he believes Gatsby was the driver of the car that killed Myrtle, he blames Gatsby for the death of his mistress. His reasons for homicidal hatred of Gatsby are even stronger, therefore, than Wilson’s. Having made a serious attempt to poach Tom’s wife, Gatsby has deprived him (as Tom mistakenly assumes) of his extra-pair partner. Tom views Gatsby as a sexual trespasser and conscienceless killer (“he ran over Myrtle like you’d run over a dog”) who clearly deserves to die (239).

Like her husband, Daisy plays an instrumental role in disposing of an important sexual rival. Although Daisy does not know the identity of her hit-and-run victim, she has succeeded in eliminating the hated “woman in New York.” As a driver, she is of course criminally culpable; having failed, through cowardice, to take evasive action to avoid hitting a pedestrian, she compounds her guilt by refusing to stop to offer assistance and admit responsibility. Her behavior represents fundamental “carelessness” rather than calculated murder, but she has inadvertently achieved fitness-enhancing results: she has rid herself of a competitor vying for her husband’s time, attention, and wealth. Without conscious awareness or deliberate intent, she has acted as if inspired by sexual jealousy, committing an act of violence that protects her long-term reproductive interests.

Because loss of resources and desertion represent the most significant evolutionary threats to women in long-term partnerships, female jealousy is more easily provoked by signs of a husband’s emotional investment in another woman than by signs of sexual disloyalty. Daisy is right to think Myrtle represents a greater danger to her marriage than Tom’s other casual partners. He has, after all, made provision for an indefinitely protracted involvement, even setting up an apartment. He is tolerating Myrtle’s intrusion, via the telephone, into the Buchanan home—behavior he certainly could forbid. In Tom’s last conversation with Nick, significantly, he confides that in his grief for Myrtle he “cried like a baby” (119). For evolutionarily sound reasons, any wife would feel jealous of a rival who had insinuated herself this deeply into her husband’s affections. Even though, as already discussed, Myrtle poses only the smallest of long-term threats to the Buchanan marriage, her presence in Tom’s life is an ongoing source of aggravation and unease to Daisy. Thus Daisy benefits from Myrtle’s death in the same

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51 Barry Edward Gross accurately points out that by the time this accident occurs, pervasive references to automobiles and driving styles have “established reckless driving as indicative of some fatal inner … dishonesty.” Critical Extracts, in Gatsby: Major Literary Characters, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991), 25.

52 Buss, Dangerous Passion, 52-62.
way, if not to the same degree, that Tom does from Gatsby’s. Conscious intention aside, her vehicular homicide creates a perversely appropriate symmetry in her marriage. She and Tom are quits: he has killed her lover, and she has killed his. There is indirection, and thus deniability, in both homicides: Tom does not pick up a gun and shoot Gatsby, any more than Daisy knowingly targets Myrtle for slaughter. Since neither knows what the other has done, moreover, their relationship can continue undisturbed by any after-the-fact suspicion or rebuke.

The jealous violence erupting at the end of the novel sheds unsparing light on the fitness-based emotions seething beneath the glittering surface of the principal settings. The ferocity of inter-and intrasexual competition emerges with especial clarity. Not only do characters take radical steps to guard and retain their mates, they wreak vengeance, sometimes fatal, on rivals seeking to displace them. In addition to showing the intensity of mating conflicts, the killing of Gatsby and Myrtle encourages readers to judge the Buchanan couple harshly. Tom and Daisy appear untouched by the deaths they have caused, unabashed by what Nick dubs their “vast carelessness”; they regard their actions as either unavoidable or “entirely justified” (139). They fortify the stability of their union by eliminating sexual rivals, and they do so with a callousness that underlines their essential compatibility. Their hasty departure following the deaths of Myrtle and Gatsby smacks of unspoken collusion: on some level they may intuit that they are assisting each other to cover up crimes. Their “banal and shabby intimacy” provides foundation for a marriage that is, in Brian Way’s summation, “a realistic, if worthless, practical arrangement that suits their shallow personalities.”

Gatsby: Misconceptions and Delusions

Gatsby’s identification of wealth with status is not the only mistaken idea shaping his career. Another misconception he harbors is that ambition can be severed from procreative concerns. Because material resources and social reputation play such a decisive role in female mate selection, it is adaptive for men to work strenuously to acquire them. More than anything else, the hope of attracting

53 Brian Way, “The Great Gatsby,” in F. Scott Fitzgerald's “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 99.
women—who are, after all, the limiting factor in male reproductive potential—spurs men’s striving. Men need not be aware of the procreative purpose fueling their quests for fame and fortune. Gatsby, for example, tells Nick that falling in love with Daisy has prevented him from “doing great things,” derailed his plans: “there I was, way off my ambitions” (117). Before meeting her, he has cherished ill-defined but “ineffable” fantasies about his “future glory” (77). Setting forth at the age of seventeen for profitable adventures, he is not consciously thinking that shedding his “shiftless and unsuccessful” farming background is the first step to improved mating opportunities (76). “Extravagantly ambitious,” he is attracted to “beauty and glamour” in and of themselves—or so he thinks (78). With the confidence of youth, he is convinced that he could reach “incomparable” heights “if he climbed alone,” but to “wed his unutterable visions” to a “perishable” girl will keep him earthbound (86).

Reduced to its essence, Gatsby’s thinking on this point resembles the last-minute reservations expressed by many bridegrooms: marital commitment ties a man down, imposes obligations, limits future options. A wife is a living being, “perishable,” who must be supported with material resources rather than with “unutterable visions.” Thinking that now “his mind would never romp again like the mind of God,” Gatsby contemplates in advance the disadvantages of the reproductive strategy to which, emotionally at least, he has just committed or “wed” himself (86). Long-term responsibilities largely will replace the unattached man’s “god”-like sense of infinite potential. Because humans are intelligent and complex creatures who command an array of behavioral strategies, mating behavior included, they are able to entertain a multiplicity of options, exercising a high degree of conscious choice. Here the young and unencumbered Gatsby engages in anticipatory nostalgia, mourning strategic alternatives he has decided to forego. In terms of fitness, of course, reproductive success trumps reproductive potential. By wedding his ambitions to a potential mate, Gatsby is behaving adaptively, a fact he never recognizes.

His incomprehension is not unusual. Men frequently speak of wives and offspring as if they were obstacles to success rather than proof of it. Riches and fame often are praised as if they constituted ultimate goals. Once a particular pattern of behavior becomes adaptive, it can take on a momentum of its own (as happens, for instance, in run-away sexual selection). People value money and prestige for sound evolutionary reasons, but in contemporary environments these can be sought and often obtained in much larger quantities than reproductive needs dictate. The agricultural revolution, which first enabled humans to create permanent settlements, also enabled them to amass far more property
than a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle will permit. Increased wealth, coupled with unequal distribution, leads inevitably to greater socioeconomic stratification: the struggle for advantageous hierarchical placement grows more difficult. Given conditions of excess and extremes, an adaptive trait or tendency may become detached, in terms of conscious intention, from the reproductive purposes it is designed to serve. Maladaptive accumulation of resources in a modern environment is, of course, a principal thematic concern in *The Great Gatsby*. Much secondary commentary focuses accordingly on the corrupting effect of wealth, including Fitzgerald’s presentation and critique of the rags-to-riches “American Dream.”

The novel’s narrator demonstrates that he does not share Gatsby’s misconceptions about the purpose of material resources. It is only when Nick discovers that Gatsby’s fantastical show of wealth is a courtship tactic, designed to attract the attention of a woman he has pursued devotedly for five years, that he finds him intriguing: “He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor” (62). The metaphoric use of procreative vocabulary (“deliver,” “womb”) helps to emphasize Nick’s insight: a magnificent display of material assets is pointless unless it promotes fitness. As a mating effort, Gatsby’s “career as Trimalchio” is dedicated to reproductive ends and thus makes evolutionary sense (88). No frivolous exhibitionist, as Nick initially assumed, Gatsby is the “high-bouncing” lover described in the poem serving as the novel’s epigraph: he dons a “gold hat” chiefly in order to “move” the girl of his dreams (epigraph, lines 3, 1).

54 For representative analyses of Fitzgerald’s presentation of the American Dream in the novel, see Marius Bewley, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “The Great Gatsby,”* ed. Ernest Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Edwin S. Fussell, “Fitzgerald’s Brave New World,” *English Literary History* 19, no. 4 (1952); David Stouck, “The Great Gatsby as Pastoral,” in *Gatsby: Major Literary Characters*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991); James E. Miller, Jr., “Fitzgerald’s Gatsby: The World as Ash Heap,” in *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,”* ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984); Neila Seshachari, “The Great Gatsby: Apogee of Fitzgerald’s Mythopoeia,” in *Gatsby: Major Literary Characters*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991); Posnock, “A New World, Material Without Being Real: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism”; Hugh Kenner, “The Promised Land,” in *Gatsby: Major Literary Characters*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991).

55 Attributed to “Thomas Parke D’Invilliers,” a character from Fitzgerald’s 1920 novel, *This Side of Paradise*, the poem was written by Fitzgerald himself, as Matthew J. Bruccoli points out. “Explanatory Notes,” in *The Great Gatsby*, ed. and rpt. by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 180.
Gatsby’s conviction that pursuit of women interferes with the real business of men’s lives (“doing great things”) is further explored in the novel by the association of Daisy with the sirens of classical mythology. The seductive power of those monstrous females figures, most familiar to Fitzgerald and his readers from the famous anecdote in Homer’s *Odyssey*, is concentrated in the irresistible sweetness of their singing. Exercising a supernatural capacity to bewitch and beguile, they use their beautiful voices to lure men to destruction. Persistent references to the “inexhaustible charm” of Daisy Buchanan’s voice subtly compare her to Homer’s sirens, attributing to her a similarly dire erotic power (94). On at least eight different occasions, Nick draws attention to the unique quality and effect of Daisy’s voice. The “principle instrument with which she casts her spell over Gatsby,” as Bender points out, it communicates “excitement”; it exercises “a singing compulsion” that “men” find “difficult to forget” (11). The “exhilarating ripple of her voice” acts like “a wild tonic,” simultaneously seductive and entrancing (67). Nick speculates that Gatsby’s spellbound fascination with Daisy is inspired chiefly by the “feverish warmth” of her voice, which “couldn’t be over-dreamed—that voice was a deathless song” (75). Presentation of Daisy as a siren-figure emphasizes the almost mystical strength of her hold on Gatsby.

The siren allusion also calls attention to Gatsby’s evolutionarily unsound notion that wooing Daisy prevents achievement of important masculine ambitions. Like Homer’s mariners, he was going about his business when a voice of incomparable sweetness called to him, luring him to his doom. Such negative presentation of women’s attractiveness to men is, of course, an important purpose of siren mythology and related legends, as Barbara Smuts points out. In many societies, historically and cross-culturally, women have been “portrayed as dangerous and polluting, and it is their sexuality that makes them so.” With tales of fatally alluring females, men attempt to blame women for male behavior—male sexual behavior, in particular. It comforts men to think that Helen’s beauty or Circe’s magic, rather than masculine ardor and male-male competition, caused the Trojan War or turned men into swine. Daisy’s siren-like effect on Gatsby accordingly evokes sympathy for the male victim and

56 Bender, *Evolution and “the Sex Problem,”* 238.
57 Smuts, “Male Aggression,” 252. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy similarly notes that in ancient Greece female sexuality was associated with the uninhibited, insatiable ardency of lionesses and female bears. The legend of the maenads, to name an obvious example, illustrates the danger such women’s eroticism allegedly poses to men. *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 262.
his obsessive devotion, even as it censures the woman's indifference to her destructive attractions. Daisy drives Gatsby's life off-course twice by choosing Tom Buchanan over him: his inextinguishable yearning to possess her ends in his destruction. The comparison between Daisy and mythological monsters thus supports auctorial judgments on the novel's characters.

At the same time that they represent deadly danger, paradoxically, sirens embody female preciousness. Calling from a distance, they rely on their singing to telegraph their beauty and so to stimulate male desire. Physical beauty, of course—displaced in the sirens' case from facial and bodily features to vocal qualities—provides the single most important cue to female reproductive capacity: this is why it triggers an ardent response in men. Men labor and compete to gain access to beautiful (i.e., fertile) women. They will dash themselves upon the rocks, figuratively speaking, in pursuit of the youthful, healthy, facially symmetrical, small-waisted, and wide-hipped females who hold the key to their fitness. Fertile women are dangerous precisely because they are so valuable: the desire to possess them moves men, willy-nilly, to engage in energy-sapping and high-risk behavior.

Like the singing of Homeric sirens, the unusually desirable Daisy’s “deathless song” tantalizes suitors seeking immortality for their DNA (75). Gatsby describes her great worth metaphorically—and aptly, given the centrality of wealth to the novel’s setting and plot—when he tells Nick that “her voice is full of money” (94). The many references to the “magic” of Daisy’s voice culminate in this statement, which Nick greets as a revelatory insight: “that was it” (84, 94). The “jingle” of coins men hear when she speaks, the “cymbals’ song” of “a white palace” and a “king’s daughter,” signal wealth and status (94). These augment and underline, via metaphor, the sexual benefits simultaneously conveyed by her voice: that “feverish warmth” and promise of “amour” (94, 61). She is, as Gatsby recognizes from the start, a doubly worthy object of desire. Her biologically attractive qualities (youth, health, beauty) are accompanied by socially attractive ones (material possessions, high status, elite networks, community regard). She offers an ideal combination of intrinsic and extrinsic worth. Gatsby’s fixation on her, which continues even after he becomes well able to woo other, more available and more amenable partners, is grounded in his initial, overwhelming impression of Daisy as “the golden girl,” a top prize in the stakes for fitness (94). For reproductively explicable reasons, she exercises siren-like appeal for him; her very voice spills over with confirmation of her high value.

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Buss, Evolution of Desire, 52-58.
The most unusual feature, by far, of Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy Buchanan is the self-deception driving it. Having formulated a three-year plan to seduce another man’s wife, he never admits that he is engaged in an act of mate poaching. Such poaching is, as Buss explains, “a common mating strategy.” “Glamorous, interesting, attractive, socially skilled people” are in short supply, inevitably, because they are identified, courted, and removed from “the marriage market” with great rapidity.\(^59\) Those who fail to secure high-value mates on the first go-round, consequently, often tempt the already-married to make new choices. Gatsby does not admit that his goal is so ordinary, that is, to persuade an especially desirable woman to abandon her marriage in order to form a new bond with him. Instead he explains his goal to himself, to Daisy, and to onlookers in terms of time-travel. Turning back the clock, he and Daisy will find themselves at “the starting place” in 1917, about to begin their life together as a couple (86). They will “be married from her house” in Louisville “just as if it were five years ago” (86). Gatsby intends to “fix everything just the way it was before” (86). His goal is nothing less than to revise history by wiping out a selected piece of the past. His conviction that this is possible, that he actually can undo temporal progression, illustrates with astounding clarity the self-deceiving powers of the human mind. Except with regard to his relationship with Daisy, moreover, Gatsby’s conception of time is rational and undistorted. He does not assume, for instance, that his hard-won wealth will disappear when he and Daisy start afresh. His false ideation is caused by selective self-deception rather than by pervasive mental derangement. Evolutionary psychology helps to explain the origin and function of his deluded thinking.

Robert Trivers neatly sums up self-deception as “the active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind.”\(^60\) The principal “reality” Gatsby seeks to misrepresent is Daisy Fay’s marriage to Tom Buchanan. The imaginary do-over, once the clock has been set back, will expunge that union from Daisy’s personal history. Obliterating the Buchaner marriage is vitally important to Gatsby because he views Daisy as belonging to him, in all but the legal sense, by virtue of prior claim. Emotionally “he felt married to her” after their mutual declarations of love and future intent: he “had committed himself” and has reason to think she has done the same (117, 116). This conviction is the foundation of the “fictitious narratives of intention” he thereafter constructs.\(^61\)

\(^59\) Ibid., 265, 264.

\(^60\) Robert Trivers, “Self-Deception in Service of Deceit,” in *Natural Selection and Social Theory: Selected Papers of Robert Trivers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 277.

\(^61\) Trivers, “Self-Deception,” 276.
If Daisy and Gatsby are joined in mutual commitment, it is Tom Buchanan who is the mate-poaching interloper. Such reasoning is counterfactual, of course: Gatsby is not and never has been Daisy’s husband. He has employed “denial and projection,” rather, “to create a self-serving world.” The illusion that he is virtually “married” to Daisy enables Gatsby to see and present himself in the most favorable possible light. So long as he considers himself a devoted long-term partner rather than a wife-stealing seducer, he can maintain a positive self-image.

What is far more important to him, however, is seeing Daisy in a favorable light, and here his reconstruction of reality does not serve him well. According to Gatsby’s interpretation of the past, he and Daisy have made a mutual long-term commitment. It must follow, then, that in marrying Tom she is guilty of infidelity and desertion: she is a defecting spouse. This is, very obviously, not how Gatsby wishes to view her. For evolutionarily excellent reasons, men expect to enjoy exclusive sexual access to their long-term partners. They demand sexual fidelity, if only to ensure that they do not waste paternal investment in offspring sired by a wife’s lovers. An unfaithful wife not only squanders her reproductive resources outside the marriage, she introduces the possibility of cuckoos in the nest, threatening her husband’s fitness. Female infidelity is a critical source of male sexual jealousy and, depending on prevailing norms, also may incur social penalties. Gatsby’s reverence for Daisy, the grail-like girl whose mate value so blindingly exceeds his own, would be severely challenged if he were compelled to regard her as sexually disloyal. Her “gleaming” image would be tarnished, her mate value diminished (117).

His misrepresentation of reality has led him into an apparently insurmountable difficulty. On the one hand, the illusion that Gatsby and Daisy are united by a bond equivalent to marriage serves his interest because it renders Tom’s claim to her illegitimate. On the other hand, that very illusion makes Daisy guilty of infidelity, a fault that renders her less desirable as a mate and less worthy of Gatsby’s extraordinary devotion. Unlike Tom Buchanan, Gatsby thinks in terms of ideals and absolutes: he could never imitate Tom’s sophisticated management or thick-skinned tolerance of Daisy’s involvement with another man (105). Gatsby long ago placed Daisy on a pedestal: she is the Madonna-like, ever loyal partner, and his elaborate plan to repossess her would lose its significance if she ceased to be worthy of his bedazzled homage. This

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62 Ibid., 271.
63 Smuts, “Male Aggression,” 246; Buss, Evolution of Desire, 66-72.
problem explains why he must convince himself that he and Daisy can “repeat the past” (86). Once her marriage to Tom is “obliterated,” there will be no question of her having been unfaithful to Gatsby (85). There will be no cause for sexual jealousy on his part, no decrease in her mate value. All he has to do to achieve these evolutionarily beneficial results is take the two of them back to “the way it was before” she met Tom (86).

Thus Gatsby’s doubly distorted vision of reality supports evolutionarily sound goals: acquisition of a high-value mate, nonviolent elimination of a rival, prevention of a mate’s infidelity and defection. Those goals remain unobtainable, however, because the methods and assumptions he relies upon to achieve them are delusional: reality keeps interfering with his program. He conveniently forgets, for instance, that Daisy has borne Tom a child, a child who is not going to vanish obligingly when the marriage that produced her has been wiped from the slate of her mother’s past. Nick observes that when Gatsby finally sees the child he stares “with surprise,” never having “really believed in its existence before” (91). He has not thought about the child because to do so would interfere with his fantasy of turning back the clock. The child is living proof that Daisy has not remained sexually faithful to him; instead she has entered into a reproductive enterprise with his sexual rival. Daisy’s and Tom’s genes are traveling toward the future in the shared vehicle of Pammy. Offspring tend to strengthen a marital bond for this very reason: parents have equal genetic interest in the jointly created beings who represent both parties’ hopes for biological continuity. These facts threaten the pattern of denial shaping Gatsby’s behavior. There is no place for Daisy and Tom’s child, ineradicable evidence of her reproductive betrayal, in his projected return to an idyllic “starting place.”

Tom Buchanan contradicts Gatsby’s “false narratives” with additional unwelcome facts when he boasts of the three years of shared intimacy he has enjoyed with Daisy. “There’re things between Daisy and me that you’ll never know,” he justly states, “things that neither of us can ever forget” (103). Even if she should choose to leave Tom, Daisy’s memory never can be wiped clean of those recollections. Her three-year union with Tom, which is social and emotional as well as reproductive, now forms an inextricable part of her present identity, which is different in some ways from the eighteen-year-old self who inspired Gatsby’s worshipful commitment. His dreams require her to remain

64 David Stouck suggests that it is because Gatsby’s initial possession of Daisy is “incomplete that his imaginative vision of her remains so “vibrantly alive.” He “is obsessed … with that moment back in time when she ‘will become’ his bride.” “The Great Gatsby as Pastoral,” 69.
65 Wright, Moral Animal, 125.
unchanged, however; she must come to him just as she was in summer 1917, with her loyalty to Gatsby intact. By insisting that neither the Buchanan marriage nor Daisy’s memory of it can be erased, Tom confronts Gatsby with facts inimical to his illusions. Gatsby’s dismaying experience in the course of a single afternoon illustrates what Trivers identifies as the most significant cost of self-deception, namely, “misapprehension of reality,” especially “social” reality.66

Daisy, too, confronts Gatsby with unpalatable psychological truths by failing to understand and comply with his project for defying temporal reality. He plans to assert his exclusive rights to Daisy on terms to be dictated by him, terms corresponding to his counterfactual assumptions. Since he cannot bear to think that he has been dispossessed of his treasured woman by a rival, he denies that this has happened. Such denial requires that the Buchanan marriage be rendered null and void. “Only in this way,” as Robert Ornstein accurately observes, “can the sacrament of Gatsby’s ‘marriage’—his prior claim—be recognized.”67 To achieve the self-interested goal of erasing Daisy’s relationship with Tom from her sexual history, Gatsby relies on magical thinking. He persuades himself that if Daisy retracts her “love” for Tom, telling him that she “never” cared for him, she will, in effect, annul her marriage (85). Gatsby invests the words he requires Daisy to say to Tom with transformative power; like a magical incantation, the phrase “I never loved you” will alter reality (85). Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo: the marriage is eradicated and Daisy’s fidelity restored. Here Gatsby’s powers of self-deception assume fairy-tale proportions. Unsurprisingly, Daisy does not understand the significance of the repudiation he demands: “I love you now—isn’t that enough?” she asks; “I can’t help what’s past” (103). This is the crux of the matter: moving forward on the basis of a fully acknowledged past will not solve the problem of Gatsby’s sexual jealousy and proprietary demands. The only way he can achieve his projected future with Daisy is by revising their personal histories: canceling—and then reliving—selected events from the previous five years. The typical announcement of a defecting mate, ‘I don’t love you any more,’ is inadequate for his purposes because it would constitute admission of a commitment—legal, social, and sexual—existing between Daisy and Tom.

66 Trivers, “Self-Deception,” 276.
67 Robert Ornstein, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Fable of East and West,” in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby, ed. Ernest Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 59. Neila Seshachari characterizes Gatsby’s reverential, quasi-religious understanding of his and Daisy’s mutual commitment in similar terms: Gatsby regards them as “eternally wedded ... in mystical rites.” The Great Gatsby: Apogee,” 100.
Commentary on the novel often describes Gatsby’s character and aims in mythic terms. He appears heroic, larger than life, because he commits himself to an imaginatively conceived, unachievable goal. From an evolutionary perspective, his obsessive pursuit of Daisy appears less than glorious in that it signal fails to secure fitness benefits: he dies, so far as readers know, without issue. His life history underlines the fact that adaptations are not algorithms that guarantee reproductive success. As Robert Wright points out, “the best that natural selection can do is give us adaptations ... that play the odds.” Gatsby sets his sights on a high-quality mate (adaptive); he demands sexual fidelity in his chosen long-term partner (adaptive). Yet his dedication to indubitably fitness-enhancing principles (get the best mate possible and enforce her fidelity) garners fewer benefits, in this instance, than more flexible strategizing might have obtained for him. The obvious step for a man in his position to take would be to select a different, even if less attractive, mate once Daisy became unavailable. A second, more time-consuming and more risk-laden option would be to implement his mate-poaching scheme with full awareness of its implications. This would mean that in persuading Daisy to abandon her marriage for him, Gatsby would acknowledge her sexual history, recognizing her less-than-sterling record for fidelity (she has deserted Gatsby for another man once already, and in leaving Tom she would further demonstrate that she is poachable). Either of these alternative mating strategies would have strengthened Gatsby’s chances to achieve a genetic legacy. Both are unacceptable to him, very evidently, because they would require him to modify his image of Daisy—to view her as something less than the ultimately precious and perfect woman—and to revise his goals accordingly.

Refusing to lower his expectations for his chosen mate or to replace her with a second choice, Gatsby turns to the realm of illusion: fantasy, make-believe, dream, myth. These terms, so often used by readers and sometimes by Fitzgerald’s narrator to describe Gatsby’s thinking and aims, are exalted descriptions of his counterfactual ideation. In William Troy’s view, for instance,

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68 For representative discussion of mythic elements in Gatsby’s quest and personality, see Kenneth Eble, “The Great Gatsby,” College Literature 1, no. 1 (1974); Miller, Jr., “Fitzgerald’s Gatsby”; Scott, “Entropy vs. Ecology”; Seshachari, “The Great Gatsby: Apogee”; Arnold Weinstein, “Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby,” in Gatsby: Major Literary Characters, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991); Marius Bewley, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America”; Giles F. Gunn, “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Gatsby and the Imagination of Wonder,” in Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).

69 Wright, Moral Animal, 106.
Gatsby is a “mythological creation” who illustrates the “projected wish fulfillment carried out on a larger scale and by the whole consciousness of a race.”

Gatsby revises the truth about Daisy’s life history in order to preserve her goddess-like image and so to his sustain his reverence for her. The mythic ideal to which he commits himself is that of the infinitely beautiful, infinitely faithful woman. The archetypal attributes of beauty (fertility) and fidelity (exclusive sexual privilege) very obviously serve men’s reproductive interests. Judith Fetterley speaks to this point in her feminist analysis of the novel, noting that the ideals portrayed are masculine: “the imaginative structures to which the book gives such brilliant expression are merely those of all men.” Gatsby’s idealized vision of Daisy represents clearly male-centered wish-fulfillment.

Her failure to live up to Gatsby’s image of her calls attention to the self-deceiving, myth-making power of the human mind. His false beliefs about her are juxtaposed to her glaring inadequacies: what she is proves incommensurate to what he imagines. Way rightly observes that this disparity between Daisy-the-person and Daisy-the-dream excites readers’ interest and empathy: “Fitzgerald has completed his immensely difficult task of convincing us that Gatsby’s capacity for illusion is poignant and heroic, in spite of the banality of his aspirations and the worthlessness of the objects of his dreams.” To laud Gatsby’s commitment to false narrative as “poignant and heroic,” however, is to valorize mental operations of seemingly dubious worth. There is nothing inherently noble about a capacity for self-interested denial and projection, yet readers marvel at Gatsby’s creative manipulation of reality, even if they also shake their heads. Fitzgerald’s protagonist provides an extreme example of the human tendency to subscribe to self-made truths.

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70 William Troy, “Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure,” in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arthur Mizener (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 21.

71 Seshachari points out that the object of Gatsby’s “personal quest” is “woman” per se, woman as “mythic ideal,” rather than Daisy herself. “The Great Gatsby: Apogee,” 94.

72 Seshachari frames the situation from an evolutionarily understandable perspective when she observes that the projected union between questing hero and “woman, in her mythic concept,” is designed to achieve “fulfillment of the purpose of life.” Ibid., 94, 95.

73 Judith Fetterley, “The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald’s droit de seigneur,” in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington and London: University of Indiana Press, 1978), 98.

74 As “actual correlative,” W. J. Harvey notes, Daisy cannot satisfy “the hunger of his aspiring imagination.” “Theme and Texture in The Great Gatsby,” in *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 83.

75 Way, “The Great Gatsby,” 99.
Invoking powers of memory, anticipation, and imagination, the human animal mentally replays and revises social history on a daily basis, subverting What-Is and What-Was in satisfying fashion with What-If and What-Might-Have-Been. Joseph Carroll, Brian Boyd, Blakey Vermeule, and other Darwinian literary theorists point out that human art—particularly literary art in the form of fictional narrative—exploits, exercises, and hones these species-typical behavioral tendencies. When real-world circumstances fail to match our imaginings, we endow our disappointment with exalted significance: we create myths, symbols, and tales to preserve and extol our commitment to unrealizable visions. Instead of bemoaning our inability to live fully in the moment as other animals do, we value our “ghostly” dreaming more highly than we do the “fire and freshness” of the phenomenal world (75). Gatsby’s life history demonstrates that mental images, no matter how self-deceiving, can become more compelling than obtainable, real-world satisfactions: “Daisy is the ‘still unravished bride’ of Keats’ urn.” Obsessed with a version of reality he does not consciously recognize as his own invention, Gatsby “incarnates the power of dream and illusion.” “The kernel of his experience,” Roger Lewis astutely observes, “is safely embedded in a previous time.” Because “his love became most intense” during the five years of their separation, “it is largely a function of his imagination.” Readers are impressed by “the power of belief” he demonstrates as he transforms ordinary things into “enchanted objects.” Fitzgerald encourages a positive response to his protagonist, furthermore, by stacking the deck against reality: that “foul dust” defiling Gatsby’s “dreams” (6). The unedifying spectacle of the Buchanans and the Wilsons, with their ordinary mate choices, rivalries, and jealousies, their banal fidelities and tawdry infidelities, renders Gatsby’s deluded quest appealing by force of contrast.

It is not coincidental that his falsifying of social and temporal facts serves his efforts to acquire and retain an ideal mate. The novel’s final passage, much admired and much discussed, dramatically expands the connection between

76 Carroll, “An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study,” see especially 23-25; Carroll, “Wilson’s Consilience and Literary Study,” 81-82; Boyd, On the Origin of Stories, see especially “Fiction as Adaptation,” 188-208. Vermeule, Why Do We Care; see especially “The Fictional Among Us,” 1-20.
77 Stouck, “The Great Gatsby as Pastoral,” 69.
78 R. W. Stallman, “Gatsby and the Hole in Time,” in Gatsby: Major Literary Characters, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1991), 62.
79 Roger Lewis, “Money, Love, and Aspiration in The Great Gatsby,” in New Essays on “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 49.
80 Weinstein, “Fiction as Greatness,” 139, 140.
procreative impulses and self-serving illusions. Comparing Gatsby to European explorers and Daisy’s attractions to “the siren song of the American continent,” Nick draws attention to the acquisitive awe inspired by resources with direct or indirect reproductive worth. Gatsby hoped to enrich his individual fitness by claiming exclusive rights to an ideal woman: young and sexually loyal, with maximum reproductive potential. European explorers and settlers similarly hoped to enrich themselves and their posterity, increasing the chances for their lineages to survive and thrive, by laying claim to bountiful natural resources in a brand-new place. That place typically has been described as a “Virgin” land, moreover, its untapped potential, like that of a virginal woman, promising great value. Fitzgerald uses figurative language to heighten his comparison, equating collective expectations awakened by discovery of the “fresh, green breast” of the New World with individual desires aroused by an incomparably beautiful, fertile young woman (140).

Both virginal girl and virgin land signal fecundity: they represent wondrous possibility; they offer inestimable benefits; they excite wishes for exclusive ownership.

In both instances, idealized images are shattered and utopian hopes disappointed. Both Daisy Buchanan and the New World fall short of their would-be possessors’ “fantastic conceits”: the endlessly faithful “golden girl,” like fabled cities of gold and fountains of youth, are self-serving fabrications (77). Resources prove exhaustible, and there are challenges to rights of possession. Acquisitive efforts are severed from biological purpose, with corrupting and destructive consequences. Once the validity of glorious imaginings is contradicted by reality, both girl and place assume a different mythic identity, that of “lost paradise”: a utopian vision all the more nostalgic because it never existed and never belonged to the hopeful claimants.

Like the lost, ideal woman, the lost, ideal land intensifies human longings to re-wind time: to return to Edenic beginnings, to start over without penalty. With its metaphoric reach and historical resonance, the conclusion to Gatsby emphasizes the extent to which

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81 Joyce A. Rowe, “Delusions of American Idealism,” in Readings on “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Katie De Koster (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1998), 93.
82 Christiane Johnson provides careful analysis of parallels in diction, grammar, syntax, and metaphor that support the comparison of Gatsby (and his “dream” of Daisy) to European explorers (and their “dream” of a new world). “The Great Gatsby: The Final Vision,” in Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).
83 Ibid., 117.
fitness-driven goals dominate the interior life of every human being. Operating largely through proximate mechanisms inaccessible to conscious awareness, procreative energies exert powerful shaping influence on individual aspirations, preconceptions, rationalizations, and regrets. These same energies also animate fantastically falsified narratives—of self and of tribe—activating the symbol-making propensities peculiar to our species.