

How is Wolfsheim, along with the anti-Semitism informing his characterization, important to shaping the conflicts of the novel?

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Barbarism and Refinement: An Analysis of the Conflicts in *The Great Gatsby*

Meyer Wolfsheim—Jewish, shady associates, illegal dealings, and all—is sketched as a man to be despised as much as he is to be feared. Half-veiled threats, incomplete tales, snatches of stale rumors, accompany a scant amount of dialogue are all the reader has of him in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Yet, in his mysteriousness, Wolfsheim becomes the focus and the fuel of the novel's—and the times—uncertainties and fears.

An infamous player within the criminal underworld, Wolfsheim is introduced to Nick as a business associate of Gatsby. Deeply involved in organized crime and perhaps responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series, his character is a curious mix of barbarism and refinement (his cuff links are made from human molars). The anti-Semitism of the author's tone is established with the stress Fitzgerald places on religion; it is Nick's first priority to place a label. This view finds a willing mouthpiece throughout the book as Tom expounds on the superiority of the Nordic race

and denounces the abomination of interracial marriages.

Furthermore, Wolfsheim brings class tensions to the forefront. The people of Fitzgerald's world are deeply divided—rich vs. poor, new money vs. old money. Everyone has an image to maintain: the old rich have casualness about spending. The opulence is tempered by a certain birthright. The new rich are much flashier about expenses. Thus, the old look down upon the new because they lack the right ancestors. When Wolfsheim has the resources to float Walter Chase and silence him, the aristocratic Tom is furious; a man of his station ought not to be obligated to a crass criminal. Yet, the fact is that Wolfsheim has power because he has the largest checkbook.

In walking the line between reality and image, Gatsby walks the finest path. Others put on airs of being well-read by having shelves of blank bound pages, but Gatsby takes the illusion one step further and has actual words in his novels. Wolfsheim is proud in his assertion that he made Gatsby into the man he is today. However, all that establishes is that a person's facade is simply a carefully chosen collection of lies. Very rarely can one unearth all the secrets of another: rarely can one create the perfect image—hints are dropped from the moment one walks into the room of sinister schemes.

Inherent in the lifestyle of both classes is alcoholism. One of Wolfsheim's business plans was a series of drugstores that sold “grain alcohol over the counter” (133) —bootlegging. In the wake of the World Wars, disillusionment pervaded the population. Few comprehended the scope of human suffering until the horror of the trenches and machine-guns. The Roaring 20's attempted to dull this knowledge with booze.

This emptiness is compounded by the inability to form human connections. There is something truly wrong in the world when a mobster such as Wolfsheim sends a telegram of regret for Gatsby's death, but Tom and Daisy offer neither apology nor tears. The two of them are reckless drivers, wrecking lives without concern for the human beings affected. When the pieces fall apart, they have the money and the name to quickly pack up and leave to avoid the consequences—another tour of Europe, perhaps? The true compassion, instead, lies with Wolfsheim: one must “learn to show... friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead” (172). Forge the connections; be “thick like that in everything” (171).

Wolfsheim, with the anti-Semitism and illicit dealings informing his characterization, is a trigger in bringing into focus tensions that lie beneath the surface of the society. He is both a symptom and cause of society's ills: he is both a criminal and seeming the last compassionate man of Gatsby's acquaintance. Wolfsheim's presence adds a robust facet to the decadent and crumbling veneer of the era.