

According to one of the characters in Azar Nafisi's contemporary memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, the only "sympathetic" person in the novel is "the cuckolded husband, Mr. Wilson." What aspects of The Great Gatsby might be offered as grounds for such a claim, and is the claim ultimately convincing?

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On a superficial level, the actions or inactions of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* may be horrifying and profoundly immoral. In fact, one of Azar Nafisi's students in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* claims that Mr. Wilson, "the cuckolded husband and "genuine symbol of the oppressed" is the only character worthy of any sympathy (Nafisi 127). There are many portions of this novel that seem to back up this claim. Yet the true definition of a sympathetic character invariably exculpates Gatsby and indicts Wilson.

Gatsby certainly gives the impression of being amoral: "Somebody told me that he killed a man once," gossips a girl at one of his parties (Fitzgerald 44). His claim of being educated at Oxford is somewhat ambiguous and uncorroborated. He has criminal ties to Meyer Wolfsheim, a mall who shrouds his crimes in murky diction. Most importantly to the novel is the fact that Gatsby's goal is to continue an old relationship with a now married woman. In Nafisi's novel, this determination elicits fervent outbursts from some students. They wonder how anyone may admire such an unredeemable goal. They liken this goal to Western civilization's moral bankruptcy and dismiss it forthright.

Mr. Wilson, on the other hand, is a straightforward man who lacks any of the careless ambitions that are instinctive to all other characters. His wife, Myrtle Wilson, fed up with the man who she believes is her social inferior, turns to adultery. She flaunts the ease at which she is able to deceive her hard working husband who has done nothing to deserve his punishment. The patience he shows his wife after learning of her unfaithfulness seems to be a beacon of virtue. His attempts at secluding her ultimately result in her death when she attempts to escape. He is unintentionally caught between "careless people" who "[smash] up things and creatures and then [retreat] into their money," (179). His death at the conclusion of the novel seems wholly unjustified. He should not have been driven to suicide by other people's carelessness and betrayal. Wilson is the only innocent character in the novel—yet he is not sympathetic.

A sympathetic character is one which we may commiserate with and cheer for. A sympathetic character's ambitions mimic and reflect our ambitions, and we applaud his successes while recognizing his failures. This character need not possess traditional morals, yet must react to a situation with commendable drive and zeal. Wilson does not fit this mold because ultimately he is not a strong character. When given the opportunity to assert his desires upon learning of his wife's duplicity, he instead opts to be passive and attempts to run from his problems (123). His death is saddening yet enormously overshadowed by Gatsby's death.

Gatsby, on the other hand, has "committed himself to the following of a grail," (149). His singular determination to recapture his old love defines him—not his many misdeeds. An encounter with Daisy in Nick's house exemplifies this quality. When faced with what he has sought for so many years, Gatsby is terribly embarrassed and dumbfounded. He pulls Nick aside and tells him that it was a mistake for him to set up the lunch with Daisy. Ultimately, when chastised, Gatsby turns himself around and faces what now terrifies him (88). When faced with his fear he may falter but he will always face it head on. He has such faith in his goal to win back

Daisy that he is even willing to take the fall for the unintentional killing of Mrs. Wilson. None of these goals may parallel any sort of conventional morality, yet this is not necessary.

The beliefs held by the characters in Nafisi's novel undermine their arguments. The student who stated that Mr. Wilson is the only character worthy of any sympathy—Mr. Nyanzi—is a young, zealous conservative. He is unable to look past his own religious beliefs to appreciate many of the qualities Gatsby possesses. In fact, he states that Gatsby was killed by “the hand of God,” at the conclusion of Fitzgerald's novel (Nafisi 127). He clearly and resents success and determination and is only capable of commiserating with the oppressed. His personality exemplifies the narrowness of his argument.

Ultimately, the folly of this student is that he is searching for some ethical lesson in Gatsby's character. He is unable to distinguish between reactionary morality and the true sympathy that may be exhibited for Gatsby. Wilson may be moral and truly oppressed, yet he is a static character with little or no drive toward a clearly defined goal. Gatsby, on the other hand, has true successes and maintains a singular determination that is incredibly sympathetic.