

From his first appearance, Tom Buchanan is a mouthpiece of racism. For instance, he sees himself as one of the “Nordics” who “make civilization;” and who must prevent “these other races” from having “control of things” [p.13]. Elsewhere, he complains of the lack of “self-control” of people who “begin by sneering at family life and family institutions,” and threaten to “throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” [130]. How does Tom’s expression of such attitudes illuminate his character, his relations with Daisy, and his sense of his place in the world?

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Tom Buchanan: The Ruthless Protector

At first glance, Tom Buchanan’s speech about Nordic superiority is just one of hate and disgust for other races. However, Tom focuses more on his fear of the demise of his way of life, becoming “utterly submerged” by others (13). His racism is a facade for his fear of romantic dreamers, such as Gatsby, who he believes are a different race altogether. Tom’s passionate and harsh expression about his views on race sheds light on his character, his relationship with Daisy, and his sense of his place in society: it portrays his ruthlessness in protecting the way of life of the established rich from romantic dreamers.

Romantics, like Gatsby, are those who come from humble beginnings with a dream to be successful and wealthy. These men and women pose a threat to the established rich (i.e. Tom), and their romantic possibilities must be extinguished in order to stop the movement from spreading to other people. Eventually, Gatsby becomes such a threat to Tom by attempting to win Daisy over that Tom must dispose of him immediately: his fear that a romantic dreamer will try to take part of his life becomes a reality when Gatsby comes into the picture. By telling Wilson where Gatsby lived, Tom is essentially guilty for the murder of Gatsby and suicide of Wilson. It is, therefore, clear that Tom will protect his way of life without a sense of responsibility for others.

Tom’s call for “self-control” in order to prevent the “sneering at family life and family institutions” is probably one of the most hypocritical statements in the entire book due to the existence of Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson (130). Daisy, it seems, is just a prize acquired by his wealth, and although she falls victim to his mistreatment, she embodies the world he lives in. Tom offers her the security of being from the established rich (as opposed to Gatsby’s shady occupation) and the price she pays is his infidelity. In addition, Tom states that everything will go overboard once there is intermarriage between black and white (130). Here, Tom hints at the consequence of what will happen if those of “Old Money” marry with romantics (i.e. Daisy and Gatsby)—the difference between the two socio-economic classes are as clear as the difference between black and white. Once again, Tom portrays his adamancy of keeping his way of life alive.

The most vigorous way Tom keeps the Buchanan way of life alive is through moral carelessness. Following his meeting with Tom, Nick describes Tom as careless person who “retreats back to [his] money... and lets other people clean up the mess [he] had made” (179). Tom believes that he should be on top of society because of his wealth and power. Maintaining his position requires exhausting the people around him at all costs: he robs Gatsby and George Wilson of the romantic possibility of becoming successful. This depletion of hope causes them to become dull and grey—they become the Valley of Ashes, part of the living dead that Tom has created by taking away their romantic optimism. By attempting to maintain his way of life, Tom

has reduced a whole people to ashes without any thought of consequences.

Tom's passion that he portrays while speaking about the demise of civilization due to different races stems from his fear that romantic optimists will ruin his people's way of life. The only way the Buchanan way of life can be sustained is if they live off the energy of others and their sense of superiority is continued. Thus, in the course of maintaining his lifestyle, his wealth and carelessness leaves behind corpses and a valley of ashen, lifeless people. Through Tom Buchanan, Fitzgerald portrays the ruthlessness and carelessness of those who deplete romantic optimism and do not carry a sense of responsibility for human welfare.