

*An intriguing exchange between Nick and Gatsby takes place near the end of Chapter Six: “I wouldn’t ask too much of her,” Nick says “You can’t repeat the past.” “Can’t repeat the past?” Gatsby cries out. “Why of course you can!” (p. 110). How does the past impinge upon the present in the lives of both Nick and Gatsby? Should we see Gatsby as eccentric in his view that one can not merely repeat, but change, the past by starting over?*

## Past and Hope in The Great Gatsby Mason Scisco

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180).

This last line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic novel *The Great Gatsby* carries with it the weight of a warning carefully developed within its pages: each of us carries our past with us, but changing that past is an exercise in futility. The novel's narrator, Nick, gives Fitzgerald's warning a voice, informing the novel's titular character, “You can't repeat the past,” to which Gatsby replies, “Why of course you can!” (110). Despite their opposing views, the past exerts a powerful force over both characters' present circumstances, and here, Fitzgerald introduces another central idea: hope. Gatsby's past emerges in his “romantic hope” for the future—a blind optimism rooted in his personal powers of reinvention. Simultaneously, Nick's past, grounded in a sensible Midwestern upbringing, allows him to place his hope in those around him rather than in the material infatuations Gatsby treasures.

Nick's incorruptible Midwestern values (much like Gatsby's “incorruptible dream” of changing the past) guide him through the novel: “...’Just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages you've had,” Nick's father instructed him (1). Nick continues, explaining that his father's words have forced him to “reserve all judgments” and that “reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope” (1). Nick, then, shares in a version of Gatsby's hope for the future. The important demarcation, however, is that Nick's solid upbringing has taught him to place his hope in people, not things. This, perhaps, is what Nick refers to when he says that Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” but also why he must reassure himself that “Gatsby turned out all right in the end” (2). Indeed, throughout the novel, Nick reminds himself of his hope in Gatsby, as when Nick says, “I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before,” during the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom at the Plaza Hotel (130). Nick's hope for Gatsby emerges as the decency with which he treats Gatsby in the end, yet another component of the Midwestern upbringing from Nick's past. Hope, decency, loyalty and responsibility lead Nick to conclude “I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone... It grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested” (165). But Nick's understanding of the past is no more evident than when he professes his honesty. His claim that he is “one of the few honest people” he has ever known forces him to confront the “vague understanding” of an engagement back home before he pursues his interest in Jordan Baker (60). These “interior rules” are Nick's defining characteristics, ones Gatsby notably lacks.

Gatsby's past, unlike Nick's, is indistinct. He has used his “extraordinary gift for hope” — his ambition—to better what he sees as faults in himself as his “General Resolves” prove. But Gatsby goes further than merely correcting his faults; he invents a new identity. By the time the reader meets Jay Gatsby, he has changed his name, denied his parents' existence, and exaggerated the better aspects of his life (his brief college education, his dubious wealth) to

immense proportions. In doing so, Gatsby has proved to himself that he can successfully change the story of his past. Changing his past with Daisy, then, is not such an insurmountable dream. It is important to note, however, that Gatsby consistently places his “infinite capacity for hope” in things (money, clothes, houses), which he believes will impress Daisy. They do—Daisy cries over the inherent possibility associated with Gatsby's fine shirts—but Gatsby misses the point.

By not placing his hope in Daisy the person but rather the material aspects associated with acquiring her, he transforms Daisy herself into a thing—an overblown manifestation of hope and obsession. Gatsby objectifies her when he describes her voice as “full of money,” and Nick realizes this fact when he notes that Daisy must have, at times, fallen short of “the colossal vitality of [Gatsby's] illusion”(120, 97). In fact, Gatsby objectifies everyone in his world, reducing them into bits of opportunity. He uses Nick to meet Daisy at Nick's house; he uses Jordan to inform Nick of his plans to meet Daisy there; and Daisy herself becomes just another obstacle to capturing, as Nick describes it, “some idea of himself... that had gone into loving Daisy” (111). This observation is strengthened by Nick's contention that Jay Gatsby himself was a product of a seventeen-year-old boy's imagination, complete with its naive ideas about love and, it seems, the past.

Try as he might, Gatsby cannot change his past. He can cover it up with lies and extraordinary hope, but, like it or not, the past stays. Like Nick, Gatsby too carries his past into his present—he carries his inexperience with high society into his dream of a past long since put away. He insists on lavish parties and lavish displays of wealth, mimicking a seventeen-year-old's vision of what “wealth” really means— “a universe of ineffable gaudiness” (99). And so Gatsby's dream fails, and his eccentric nature surfaces when faced with the hard present. “I don't think he had ever really believed in its existence before,” Nick says of Gatsby's surprise at having seen Daisy's child—a concrete manifestation of the present. But, in his characteristically clouded hope—centered on *things*, not *people*, Gatsby is able to ignore the child, instead placing his hope in the trap of his possessions. Fitzgerald's warning, then, becomes evident: we are, indeed, borne back into the past but only in the sense of what we have learned from it. Nick's past, his Midwestern upbringing, brings perspective and value to Gatsby's history, but Gatsby does not change, cannot change, because his past is based on lies. The result is a tragic end, for Gatsby's death leaves him alone, with only Nick able to feel “a certain shame” (170). Gatsby's “orgastic hope for the future” was no match for “what a man will store up in his ghostly heart” (180, 97). Gatsby failed because his request of Daisy was not only eccentric but also impossible. She could not go to Tom and say, “I never loved you,” because this, like so much of Gatsby's past, would be a lie. Fitzgerald offers his warning through Nick's words: “It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended you own powers of adjustment” (105). So to his incorruptible dream, Gatsby was faithful to the end—faithful to the death. A stern warning, indeed.