

**DESIRE, RESENTMENT AND REPRISAL: REVISITING THE
EMOTIONS OF MYTH IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT
GATSBY***

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to reassess F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* (1925), taking into consideration the myth-critical hypotheses of philosopher René Girard. Specifically, this essay will analyse the concepts of mimetic desire, resentment and reprisal violence as emotional components of myth, paying close attention to how the reinterpreted mythical pattern of the novel influences the depiction of such emotions as social traits of corruption. Finally, this article will challenge interpretations that have regarded *Gatsby* as a successful scapegoat-figure, examining instead how the mythical meanings and structures of the text stage an emotional crisis of frustrated desire and antagonism that ultimately offers no hope of communal restoration.

KEYWORDS

René Girard, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, American literature, myth-criticism, mimetic desire, violence, Grail myth.

**DESEO, RESENTIMIENTO Y REPRESALIA: REVISITANDO LAS EMOCIONES
DEL MITO EN *THE GREAT GATSBY*, DE F. SCOTT FITZGERALD**

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende reevaluar el clásico de F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) desde la teoría del mito del filósofo René Girard. En particular, este ensayo analiza los conceptos de deseo mimético, resentimiento y violencia de represalia como componentes emocionales del mito, dando cuenta de cómo los patrones míticos reinterpretados en la novela influyen sobre la representación de tales emociones como características de corrupción social. Además, este artículo cuestiona la posible interpretación del personaje de *Gatsby* como chivo expiatorio, planteando por el contrario que los significados y las estructuras míticas del texto dan cuenta de una crisis emocional—en torno al deseo frustrado y a la rivalidad mimética— que en última instancia no ofrece esperanza de regeneración comunitaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE

René Girard, *The Great Gatsby*, F.ScottFitzgerald, literatura de los Estados Unidos, mito-crítica, deseo mimético, violencia, mito del Grial.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to advance a myth-critical reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* (1925) taking into consideration the theoretical and myth-critical hypotheses of philosopher René Girard. Specifically, this essay will focus on analysing the concepts of mimetic desire, resentment and reprisal violence as emotional components of myth. Going further than simply reviewing the presence and function of these concepts in Fitzgerald's novel, this myth-critical exploration of the text will consider two phenomena that reinterpret these 'emotions of myth', namely: the (apparent) transcendence of mimetic desire and the frustration of the sacrificial crisis that results from the impossibility of overcoming the violence of resentment. In order to do that, this article aims firstly to explore if and how the novel's protagonist—James Gatz, become Jay Gatsby—transcends the mimesis of his desire to create an autonomous and genuine aspiration that is only mediated by the character's worldview, which ultimately emerges from himself. Secondly, this study will reconsider how violence functions in the text by reconsidering the discontent that afflicts the community portrayed in the novel. Far from taking at face value the interpretations that have regarded Gatsby as a successful scapegoat-figure, whose death can purge the ills of his community, this article will reflect on how the subversion of traditional mythical patterns in the novel actually brings about an emotional crisis of frustrated desire and antagonism that ultimately offers no hope of restoration.

2. TOWARDS DESIRE ACCORDING TO ONESELF

In his seminal first book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961),¹ Girard comments on Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to illustrate his notion of mimetic

¹From the original in French *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Yvonne Freccero translated it for the John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, in 1966.

desire. According to Girard's explanation, Alonso Quijano's desire to become a knight errant does not originate in himself, but instead results from his imitation of a model, Amadis de Gaula, who thus becomes the "mediator" of Quijano's desires (Girard, *Reader* 34). The consequence of this is that "Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual's fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis must choose for him" (34). This creates a triangle that separates the individual from the object pursued, and, as a consequence, the individual loses their sense of reality and sees their judgment impaired (35). As Girard hypothesizes, the individual "borrow[s] their desires from the Other in a movement which is so *fundamental and primitive* that they completely confuse it with the will to be Oneself" (35, my italics).

At first glance, one may argue that this process of losing oneself by surrendering one's desires to the imitation of a model also affects Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's novel; that is, one may argue that Gatsby is in fact "a typical example of the victim of triangular desire" (35). Rather like Quijano, James Gatz changes his name when he meets the rich and ostentatious Dan Cody, and from that moment onwards, Gatsby seems determined to obtain everything that his 'mediator' Cody possesses. Yet the nature of Gatsby's desire is presented as far more complex than one might initially consider, for as such it is perceived by the homodiegetic narrator Nick Carraway, who informs the reader:

James Gatz—that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career—when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior. It was James Gatz who had been loading along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat, pulled out to the *Tuolomee*, and informed Cody that a wind might catch him and break him in half an hour. (Fitzgerald 79)

The object of James Gatz's desire—like the object of Quijano's desire—is to become someone else. Gatz wants to be the *great* Gatsby, the Long-Island settled millionaire who organizes extravagant, decadent parties and has left behind the anodyne West, once a mythical land of plenty, as it will be explained, and now decayed into "the ragged edge of the universe" (Fitzgerald 2). The vision of Cody's luxurious yacht triggers the transformation, certainly, but as perceived and, more to the point, as *narrated* by Nick, Gatz's desire to become Gatsby is presented as already existing long before he met Cody. From

the moment he meets Cody onwards, Gatsby does imitate his mediator so as to give a specific shape to his aspirational yearnings, but the persona that Gatz becomes “at the specific moment [...] when he saw Dan Cody’s yacht” seems to transcend the particularities of the imitated model.

From his own idealistic conception of Gatsby, Nick assumes that James Gatz had thought of the name ‘Jay Gatsby’ long before he *became* Jay Gatsby, which seems to suggest that there was in Gatz an original desire that might be interpreted as genuine insofar as it is a desire “*according to Oneself*” (Girard, *Reader* 35). This interpretation seems cognate with Nick’s well-known judgement of Gatsby’s origins and fate, that is, that “Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself [...] and to this conception he was faithful to the end” (Fitzgerald 80). According to this assumption, Gatz’s desire to be someone else, someone *better*, is not born out of the imitation of a model that he might envy or admire, but as the natural and unstoppable result of his idealistic (and romantic) conception of existence:

A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing. (80)

Jay Gatsby, as the material incarnation of a platonic understanding of reality, that is, as Nick presents him, truly transcends the mere imitation of a model. This circumstance is crucial for a myth-critical interpretation of the text, because, in fact, the overcoming of a merely aspirational or envious desire in the pursuit of self-improvement is inextricable from the subversion of mythical patterns realized by Gatsby’s partial imitation of Cody. After all, Cody is a pioneer and thus embodies the mythical figure of the frontier hero;² but in the world of Fitzgerald’s novel, that mythical figure has become degenerate. Cody is “the pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the

²The cultural archetype of the ‘frontier hero’ is mythical because, even though it “is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, [...] its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity” (Slotkin 8). Frontier-hero narratives have shaped the “myth of the frontier,” which Slotkin defines as “the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (5).

frontier brothel and saloon” (Fitzgerald 81). Little seems to share this character “of the frontier brothel and saloon” with the *great Gatsby*, as far as Nick Carraway is concerned. Gatsby’s greatness, as Nick narrates, is then not the consequence of Gatz’s imitation of Cody’s lifestyle—which he does in order to give a specific shape to his Gatsby persona—but the fact that this transformation obeys to Gatz’s idealistic, romantic, i.e., *platonic* conception of existence, which, insofar as it remains outside of (a corrupted) reality, or rather, within “the unreality of reality,” isolates Gatsby’s dream so that it can remain “incorruptible” (126).

Nick’s insistence on separating Gatsby’s autonomous desire from the model embodied by Cody is inextricable from Nick’s mythologizing efforts to recount Gatsby’s story as a Grail narrative. Gatsby must be different, must be *greater* than the “pioneer debauchee” because Gatsby epitomizes the heroic journey that every character attempts (and fails to complete) in the novel. Indeed, for the Puritan settlers, that is, for the first pioneers, America was “a new Canaan, a veritable land of milk and honey” (Machor 49), and their journey was “a reenactment of an *archetypal journey pattern*: a movement away from corruption, through the wilderness and its attendant hardships, toward social and spiritual redemption” (49, my italics). As it can be observed, this archetypal journey is the archetypal journey of romance, the literary *mode* that “leads from a state of order through darkness, winter, and death, to rebirth, new order, and maturity” (Saunders 3) and that always retells “the victory of fertility over the waste land” (Frye 193). It is then the journey of the Grail Knight of medieval mythology, the archetypal journey that has been corrupted by degenerate pioneers who, like Dan Cody, debased the western land of plenty and brought *back* to the East “the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon” (Fitzgerald 81). This corrupted archetypal quest-journey is reversed in the novel, as all the characters travel from West to East in a movement that provokes Nick to define himself as a “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (3). The heroic attempt to find a new land of plenty in the wasted, ash-laden East fails, however, and at the end of the novel, Nick, along with the other westerners,³ must return to “the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio” (145). As pioneers, they are no better than Dan Cody. But, apparently, Gatsby is.

As explained, Gatsby’s supposed capability of transcending the mimesis of his desire, his becoming much *greater* than his mediator, determines that he

³ Nick notes: “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (145).

truly can function like a genuine mythical pioneer seeking redemption in the 'Promised Land' of milk and honey. Nick's narration substantiates this hypothesis when he states that, in his pursuit of Daisy's love—another incarnation of Gatsby's *platonic* conception of life—"[Gatsby] had committed himself to the following of a grail"(122). Once again, Nick separates Gatsby's desire—in this case, his desire for Daisy, that is, the protagonist's emotional response to his platonic worldview—from the mere imitation of a mediator, attributing instead to such desire a mystical (and mythical) meaning that corresponds with Gatsby's platonic conception of himself, and which is thus mediated solely by Gatsby himself.

Thomas Cousineau has argued that Gatsby's dream should not be regarded as "anything more than a form of glorified plagiarism" (135), but by Gatsby's dream he refers exclusively to the character's pursuit of Daisy. This affective desire—the desire to be loved by Daisy—Cousineau argues that "was induced in him by the desires of men, such as Tom Buchanan, whose social status had made them the arbiters of desirability" (111). From the perspective of this study, however, such a claim misunderstands the function of Daisy within the boundaries of Gatsby's so called "incorruptible dream" (Fitzgerald 126), for in fact, it can be argued that she is but a manifestation of Gatsby's attempts to materialize "the unreality of reality" (80). What Gatsby wants from Daisy, she cannot give: "Oh, you want too much!' she cried to Gatsby. 'I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help the past'" (107). What Gatsby desires is that Daisy changes the past. He does not want her love in the present, does not want her to leave her husband so that he can have what Tom Buchanan possesses. Gatsby wants a platonic stasis of love, an idealized love that is changeless in the past, the present and the future. Such desire for an ideal affection that cannot ever be materialized in reality is what Nick characterizes as "the following of a grail." In this view, Gatsby's desire—which Nick explicitly mythologizes by referencing the medieval myth of the Grail, which in turn depicts Gatsby as a true mythical pioneer in search of spiritual redemption—is not and cannot be dictated by his resentment towards his supposed rival, Tom Buchanan. As narrated by Nick, and thus as presented to the reader, the mythologization of Gatsby's desire transcends the boundaries of mimetic desire, as it corresponds with the affective domain of a platonic worldview, which is what truly functions as the mediator of Gatsby's social aspirations and emotional yearnings. Thus the character, in spite of his *practical* imitation of Cody as a means to prosper and escalate in society, manages not to lose his sense of himself, as he never confuses his will with the will of the Other. Indeed, Jay Gatsby of Long Island, does spring from the

platonic conception of *himself*, and that *that conception he is faithful* to the end. That, unfortunately, cannot be said of the other characters in the novel.

3. THE COMMUNITY OF RESENTMENT

In *The Great Gatsby*, every New York socialite aspires to be richer, to live more luxuriously, and to spend more extravagantly; in other words, they all aspire to be more *like Gatsby*. Gatsby thus functions as the mediator of the other characters' desires, and this, in fact, emplaces Gatsby as the source of the discontent that blights the community. For as formulated by Girard, imitation breeds rivalry, which generates violence:

The mediator himself desires the object, or could desire it: it is even this very desire, real or presumed, which makes this object infinitely desirable in the eyes of the subject. The mediation begets a second desire exactly the same as the mediator's. This means that one is always confronted with two competing desires. The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle" (Girard, *Reader* 38).

That is to say, the characters that surround Gatsby, want to possess what Gatsby has, but also what Gatsby *wants*. The result is a brewing generalized resentment that eventually originates an eruption of violence, which, in the world of Fitzgerald's novel, might be analysed as emerging from the rivalry that opposes Gatsby and the rest of the community.

From this perspective, Gatsby and, for instance, Tom Buchanan, may be regarded as rivals but, in fact, Gatsby is the mediator of Tom's desires, and not vice versa. This is crucial to understand the undercurrent of violence that shapes the revision of traditional myth in the novel, since Tom's feelings of jealousy and resentment are what lead him to lie to garage-owner George Wilson about his pretended ownership of Gatsby's ostentatious yellow car. It is also resentment—along with a high dose of cowardice and "carelessness", as it will be explained—that leads Tom to later retract his lie, falsely accusing Gatsby of killing Wilson's wife and thus prompting the latter to seek revenge by murdering the protagonist. This spiral of violence that closes the novel thus results from the rivalry engendered by the mechanisms of imitative desire, and it tragically truncates a mythical pattern of regeneration that is cognate with the frustration of the sacrificial crisis as hypothesised by Girard.

However, in order to fully understand how the sacrificial crisis is frustrated in the novel, it is necessary to explore how, adopting a myth-critical perspective, Myrtle Wilson can be interpreted as the sexually and

socially frustrated wife of a character that mythically embodies the figure of the Fisher King, that is, the maimed king who ruled over the cursed Waste Land in the medieval myth of the Grail.⁴ Eloquently, the first lines of the second chapter describe the ash dump where George and Myrtle Wilson live as “a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (Fitzgerald 18). The iconic lines draw what Trilling defined as the “ideogram” (18) that emblemizes the wasting and degradation of the primeval land of plenty, that is, of what was the original mythical conception of America. As Tony Tanner explained, the valley of ashes embodies “the very reverse of what Emerson and his friends had hoped for America, with the land actually producing, *growing*, ashes [...] the great agrarian continent turning itself into some sort of terminal rubbish heap or wasteland, where, with ultimate perversity, the only thing that grows is death” (197).⁵

Among the ash heaps, the one distinguishable figure is George Wilson, who owns an “unprosperous and bare [garage] (...) the only building in sight (...) a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of *the waste land*” (Fitzgerald 19, my italics). Wilson is the ‘king’ of the valley of ashes, the emblem of his class, the wasted labourers whose production force has been erased in the speculative economy portrayed in the novel, where young and hungry-looking Englishmen attempt to grab at the “easy money

⁴As narrated in the earliest extant version of the Grail myth, Chrétien de Troyes’ *Conte del Graal* (ca. 1180), the Fisher King suffered a castrating wound during a battle, and his sterility was transferred to his kingdom, which became a wasteland. In order for this mythical Waste Land to be restored, the Grail Knight must relieve the King’s wound by finding the Grail, or the meaning of the Grail (depending on the version). As explained in the previous pages, Nick mythologizes Gatsby’s love and desire for Daisy, effectively characterizing him as a Grail Knight. According to the traditional pattern of the Grail myth, he should then relieve Wilson’s affliction so as to restore the wellbeing of the community.

⁵James T. Adams coined the term ‘American dream’ in his book *The Epic of America* to designate “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (374). Adams’s definition of the term as “that dream of a land” substantiates the argument that still in the decade of 1930 America was conceived, in origin, as a sort of Eden-like ‘Promised Land’, which had been a foundational notion in the early days of the country. In 1782, ‘founding father’ Benjamin Franklin argued that the reason for the uncommon growth of population in America was to be found in “the salubrity of air, the healthiness of the climate, the plenty of good provisions, and the encouragement to early marriage by the certainty of subsistence in cultivating the earth” (530).

in the vicinity” by selling “bonds or insurance of automobiles” (33).⁶The economic system portrayed in the novel—speculative capitalism—has rendered Wilson impotent from an economic perspective, but the text seems to suggest that he, as a Fisher-King figure, is also literally sick, “a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome” (19) who, after his wife dies, insists: “I’m sick (...) Been sick all day” (99). But even more suggestively, perhaps, as the king of this particular Waste Land, Wilson is also sexually impotent. Or at least that might be inferred from Myrtle’s regretful explanation for her infidelity when she confesses: “I married him because I thought he was a gentleman... I knew right away that I made a mistake” (27-28).

Myrtle’s sexual frustration, then, represented mythically in the novel, is placed in parallel with her desire to escalate socially, as both factors are the key motivators of the affair she has with Tom and the causes of her dissatisfaction with Wilson. Specifically, Myrtle wants to possess what Daisy has, and thus her mediated desire determines that she is overcome by jealousy to the point of insanity. When she manages to escape her home, where her husband had imprisoned her after learning that she had been unfaithful, Myrtle attempts to stop Gatsby’s car so that she can run away. But Daisy, who is at the wheel on that fateful night, carelessly runs her over and kills her. Immediately, Tom places the blame on his mediator and rival, Gatsby, and, seeking revenge, Wilson murders him in act of “violent reciprocity” (Girard, *Violence* 49). This reprisal frustrates the sacrificial crisis which, according to both Girard’s theory of the scapegoat and the traditional pattern of the Grail myth, should have restored the community to its former wellbeing.

As explained, within the boundaries of Nick Carraway’s narrative—the only version of events that is available to the reader—the platonic dimension of Gatsby’s desires distinguishes him from the rest of the community. Nick

⁶As VallsOyarzun notes, bonds and insurance are abstract entities that do not have intrinsic value, as their value is assigned arbitrarily depending on the evolution of economy (224). But perhaps more significantly, as also explained by VallsOyarzun, automobiles in *The Great Gatsby* also have an exchange-value rather than a use-value, as they do not usually function as means of transport, but as (false) emblems of social ostentation (227). How this circumstance affects the survival of the working class in the novel is made evident in the following conversation between George Wilson and Tom Buchanan: “I didn’t mean to interrupt your lunch,’ he said. ‘But I need money pretty bad, and I was wondering what you were going to do with your old car.’ ‘How do you like this one?’ inquired Tom. ‘I bought it last week.’ ‘It’s a nice yellow one,’ said Wilson, as he strained at the handle. ‘Like to buy it?’ ‘Big chance,’ Wilson smiled faintly. ‘No, but I could make some money on the other’” (Fitzgerald 99).

passes his judgment at the end of the novel: “‘They’re all a rotten crowd.’ I shouted across the lawn. ‘You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together’” (Fitzgerald 126). To Nick’s eyes, Gatsby seems to escape the corruption that mars the community, a corruption which, from a myth-critical perspective, might be associated with the resentment that stems from Gatsby’s mediating the other characters’ desires. This circumstance isolates Gatsby in a way that in fact allows for the character to be regarded as a human scapegoat. As Girard argues, “to appear suitable for sacrifice, [the human victim] must bear a sharp resemblance to the *human* categories excluded from the ranks of the ‘sacrificeable,’ while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion” (*Violence* 12). Thus the sacrificial victim is often found “either outside or on the fringes of society” (12).

Yet Gatsby’s suitability as a scapegoat is not only determined by his isolation from the community, or by the fact that he resembles the other New York socialites while also standing out as *different*. As Girard explains, the sacrificial victims “are chosen not for the crimes they are accused of but for the victim’s signs that they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis” (*Scapegoat* 24). Indeed, Gatsby’s position within ‘the community of resentment’ determines that he becomes the single victim of each member’s hostility, for the generalized resentment that emerges from Gatsby’s mediating the other characters’ desires results in a violent situation in which “each member’s hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual” (*Violence* 79).

As hypothesized by Girard, the sacrifice “serves to protect the entire community from its own violence [...] The elements of dissent scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice” (*Violence* 8). The result is that the killing of the human scapegoat “quell[s] violence within the community and [...] prevent[s] conflicts from erupting” (14), putting an end to the “multiplication of reprisals [that] instantaneously puts the very existence of society in jeopardy” (15). Indeed, as summarized above, the tragic dénouement of *The Great Gatsby* consists of a series of acts of revenge that emblemize the situation of vengeful violence described by Girard. Yet, following on the argument that Gatsby might occupy the position of the scapegoat within the mythical structure of the novel, one may hypothesize that, as a consequence, his death will purge the violence within the community and thus bring along the restorative ending cognate with Nick’s shaping of Gatsby’s story into the pattern of a Grail romance. However, the

tragic course of the plot events and Nick's romance-like narration of them actually result in two conflicting mythical structures that thwart all possibilities of regeneration.

The Great Gatsby frustrates the sacrificial crisis by transforming the supposed sacrificial killing of the scapegoat-figure into an act of reciprocal violence. Girard explains:

The mechanism of reciprocal violence can be described as a vicious circle. Once a community enters the circle, it is unable to extricate itself. We can define this circle in terms of vengeance and reprisals, and we can offer diverse psychological descriptions of these reactions. As long as a working capital of accumulated hatred and suspicion exists at the center of the community, it will continue to increase no matter what men do. Each person prepares himself for the probable aggression of his neighbors and interprets his neighbor's preparations as confirmation of the latter's aggressiveness. In more general terms, the mimetic character of violence is so intense that once violence is installed in a community, it cannot burn itself out. (*Violence* 81)

This is the situation that has corrupted the community in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby is killed in act of reprisal, the final result of an accumulation of resentment that derives from the characters' mimetic desires. Initially, it seems reasonable to argue that Gatsby's death can in fact redeem the community, since, as Girard explains:

When a community succeeds in convincing itself that one alone of its number is responsible for the violent mimesis besetting it; when it is able to view this member as the single 'polluted' enemy who is contaminating the rest; and when the citizens are truly unanimous in this conviction—then the belief becomes a reality, for there will no longer exist elsewhere in the community a form of violence to be followed or opposed, which is to say, imitated and propagated. In destroying the surrogate victim, men believe that they are ridding themselves of some present ill. And indeed they are, for they are effectively doing away with those forms of violence that beguile the imagination and provoke emulation. (81-82)

Indeed, all members of the community coincide in attributing to Gatsby the responsibility for the "violent mimesis" that afflicts them. Tom and Daisy deliberately place the blame of their crimes on Gatsby, electing him as the human victim in an action that might be symbolically read as the community choosing Gatsby as a scapegoat, for, as it will be explained, Tom and Daisy are the emblems of their society insofar as they incarnate the ills that blight the community. But Wilson is not a consenting member of the community that

has agreed with (or that even knows of) Tom and Daisy's plot. His actions at the end of the novel are not motivated by the unanimous decision of the community to sacrifice a scapegoat. On the contrary, Wilson murders Gatsby because of his personal resentment, which is due to the double mimetic rivalry that opposes both characters.

4. A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF REPRISAL

Wilson and Gatsby's rivalry is two-fold. The first aspect of this rivalry is inextricable from the economic circumstances described in the novel and which, as already explained, take shape in the text through the representation of the Grail myth. As mentioned, the 'ideogram' of the valley of ashes functions as a mythical space, which, in fact, is significantly characterized by what Girard defines as "a generalized loss of differences" (*Scapegoat* 24), that is, the situation of social and cultural crisis often found in myth. Symbolically, in the valley of ashes 'governed' by George Wilson, the ashen men are indistinguishable among themselves, but they are also indistinguishable from their environment, where ashes take the form of cars, houses or chimneys and, finally, of the "ash-grey men" themselves (Fitzgerald 18). Thus this symbolic wasteland, insofar as it may be interpreted as 'ideogram' of the whole society, functions as the emblem of a decomposing community defined by an "evil reciprocity [that] makes all behavior the same" (Girard, *Scapegoat* 31).

This loss of differences, made symbolically evident in the valley of ashes but also characteristic of the wealthier class in the novel,⁷ is a clear symbol of the sacrificial crisis that the novel sets up and ultimately frustrates. Marked by this loss of differences, and trapped by their mimetic desire, all characters have "the same desire, the same antagonism, the same strategies—the same illusion of rigid differentiation within a pattern of ever-expanding uniformity" and thus "as the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into 'twins', matching images of violence;" that is, "they are *doubles* of the other" (*Violence* 78-79). Following Girard's argument, this "universal spread of 'doubles'" and "the complete effacement of differences" that heightens antagonism are "the prerequisite for the establishment of violent unanimity" (79), but this violent unanimity is necessary since, as Girard argues, "for order to be reborn, disorder must first triumph; for myths to achieve their complete integration, they must first suffer total disintegration" (79). Unfortunately, in *The Great Gatsby*, the mythical pattern

⁷ See, e.g., note 3.

leading from disorder and disintegration towards eventual regeneration is frustrated.

The killing of the scapegoat does not resolve the sacrificial crisis presented, because, as mentioned, Wilson murders Gatsby in an act of reprisal and, as Girard explains, “every reprisal calls for another reprisal” (*Violence* 14). Even if one may argue that Wilson does kill the scapegoat (despite doing it for the wrong reasons) and thus the *effect* of the murder is that of a sacrifice, Gatsby’s death does not put an end to the vicious circle of violence in the novel. The sacrifice must be an act of violence “without fear of reprisal” (13) because it is this freedom from reprisal that makes the sacrifice “an act of violence without risk of vengeance” (13). Yet Wilson is not free or unafraid; right after murdering Gatsby, he kills himself. And his actions, from beginning to end, are the actions of a *rival*.

As mentioned above, the rivalry that opposes Wilson and Gatsby is two-fold, and the first dimension of this rivalry is economic. James Gatz *can* become Jay Gatsby because the fraudulent, unproductive economic system allows for his almost miraculous prosperity. In a way, Gatsby’s ability to spring from his platonic conception of himself speaks of unrealizable ideals that *seem* to become real in the same way that the economy *seems* to prosper out of the speculative (and corrupt) exchange of bonds, insurance and consumer goods that, like automobiles, only have an ostentation value. Gatsby exists as Gatsby because this fraudulent world has made it possible for him to prosper, but that world has also condemned Wilson to disappearance, since in the post-industrial capitalism of the novel the working class has been effaced as a production force. This establishes the first root cause of Wilson’s resentment towards Gatsby.

The second cause is tightly bound to the characters’ economic rivalry, so to speak. As explained, Wilson economic unproductiveness is mythologized through the character’s arguable sexual impotence, which completes his mythical characterization within the romance pattern that Nick superimposes on the narrative. As a Fisher-King figure, Wilson is arguably afflicted by a sexual disability that, as mentioned, provokes his wife’s sexual and emotional discontent, which is added to her frustrated social and economic aspirations. But these circumstances determine that Wilson grows resentful as well. He believes that Gatsby is Myrtle’s lover, that is, he perceives Gatsby as a rival, as the possessor of everything that Wilson wants but cannot have: money, a high social status, and the sexual vigor that Myrtle desires. When he is deceitfully led to believe that Gatsby killed Myrtle, the desire to retaliate adds to his full-grown resentment, which takes Wilson to murder Gatsby.

Cousinaeu argues that “while the death of Gatsby is, on the level of the novel’s surface plot, the result of an unfortunate and contingent mistake, it is a predetermined necessity for the underlying sacrificial pattern that the plot enacts” (134), insofar as Gatsby’s death “restores the peace and well-being of [the] community” (135). Having already discussed the circumstances of Wilson’s “unfortunate and contingent mistake” so as to argue that the final killings in the novel constitute acts of reprisal violence and thus may have the semblance but not the mystical resolution of a sacrifice, it becomes necessary to question the statement that Gatsby’s death proves restorative for the community. As mentioned, Gatsby is neither the last, nor the only victim of Wilson’s proposed sacrifice; moreover, his death proves anything but regenerative. Girard explains:

It is not enough to say that the surrogate victim ‘symbolizes’ the change from reciprocal violence and destruction to unanimous accord and construction; (...) the surrogate victim—or, more simply, the final victim—inevitably appears as a being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal; a supernatural being who *sows violence to reap peace; a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health.* (Violence 86, my italics)

Girard’s words about the restorative powers of the sacrificial victim, who must become a “savior” for the community, resonate with the echoes of the mystical and religious rhetoric that mythologized America’s first settlers—and later, America’s frontier heroes—who would travel the wilderness in search of a ‘Promised Land’ that would bring redemption to the people. As explained in the first part of the article, such rhetoric is fully embedded in Nick Carraway’s ‘Grail-narrative’ about the origins, life and deeds of Jay Gatsby. However, it is precisely reciprocal violence—that is, the violence erupting from the resentment that results from the characters’ envious desires and aspirations—that frustrates a redemptive ending.

As Nick notes about the characters of his narrative, “it occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well” (Fitzgerald 100). The meaning of this pronouncement is easier to decode if one takes into consideration Nick’s previously-quoted judgment of the community as a “rotten crowd” (126) in which Gatsby is “worth the whole damn bunch put together” (126). Nick distinguishes between the sick and the well, and between the “rotten” community and the character that escapes such rotting, a parallel from which it may be inferred that Gatsby—who, from Nick’s perspective, evades the

resentment inherent to mimetic desire by modelling his desire against his own platonic conception of existence—is the only ‘well’ character in a sick community. Significantly, the semantic connection between the terms ‘sick’ and ‘rotten’ is stretched by Nick to actually *characterize* the rotting of the community. In a rather ominous scene, Jordan Baker, the woman Nick is involved with, drives so close to some workmen that the car fender flicks a button on a man’s coat.⁸ “You’re a rotten driver,” Nick accuses. “Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn’t drive at all” (47). Jordan replies that “it takes two to make an accident,” but Nick is quick to point out: “Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself?” (47). The use of the word ‘rotten’ in the scene to mean ‘careless’ allows for the argument that, in fact, the community in the novel is sick because the individuals are careless. Jordan realizes this when, at the end of the novel, after Gatsby’s death, she decides to walk away from Nick:

‘Oh, and do you remember’—she added—‘a conversation we had once about driving a car?’

‘Why—not exactly’

‘You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn’t I? I mean it was *careless* of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride’. (146)

By accusing Nick of being a “bad driver,” Jordan is accusing him of being as careless as she was, but she is also characterizing that carelessness in terms of dishonesty, adding layers to the sickness that afflicts the community. Christopher Bigsby explains that the community “[is] lacking in moral responsibility and having no ethical basis for action. The chain of motor accidents which occur throughout the book merely provides evidence of the carelessness with which the characters conduct their lives” (135). It is thus carelessness—understood as a lack of moral responsibility, as indifference towards the violence within the community—that kills Myrtle. But it is also that social *irresponsibility* that eventually kills Wilson and Gatsby, who die because Tom and Daisy, in their carelessness, indifference and dishonesty, refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Nick’s commitment to his genuine desire—that is, to his desire according to himself—keeps him from running away from the trap set by Daisy. It *differentiates* him so that he can

⁸ Notice the threat that the idle and fraudulent rich (Jordan is a professional golfer accused of cheating in a tournament) pose specifically on the working class. This issue, depicted symbolically in the scene, is presented as inseparable from the community’s ‘rotting’ and ‘carelessness’.

fulfil the role of the scapegoat. But as argued throughout this article, Gatsby is eventually a victim of the reprisal violence within the community, or, in other words, he is a victim of the rotten carelessness of the community. His death, as a means to bring about communal regeneration, proves futile. There is no peace or restoration at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick narrates, reflecting on how Tom is to blame for Gatsby's death:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made... (147)

According to the mythical pattern of a Grail narrative, the hero, Gatsby, should have restored the Waste Land by relieving the Fisher King. However, the reciprocal violence that has infected the community results in a sort of mythical inversion that presents the Fisher King murdering the Grail Knight in act of misguided vengeance that effectively frustrates all hopes of a regenerative ending. Nick's efforts to make Gatsby's story conform to the meaning and structure of an archetypal journey towards communitarian redemption are in vain, a fact that he realizes precisely when Gatsby dies: "After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted *beyond my eyes' power of correction*. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home" (145, my italics).

CONCLUSIONS

As Tony Tanner argued, in *The Great Gatsby* "the green breast of the new world has given way, as an image, to the shocking spectacle of Myrtle left breast 'swinging loose like a flap' after the road accident" (196). The horrific transmutation of images suggest America's degeneration from Wonderland to Waste Land (197) as represented in a novel that describes a community rotten by resentment and reciprocal violence, in which regeneration is not possible. As explained, the vicious circle of violence does not end with Gatsby's death. In fact, even if accepting the interpretation that Gatsby's death can be regarded as a sacrifice, the sacrifice is incomplete. As Nick Narrates, "it was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the *holocaust* was complete" (133, my italics).

The OED defines 'holocaust' as "a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering." The transferred and figurative sense of the word is "a complete sacrifice or offering" ("Holocaust, n."). Bearing this in mind, both Gatsby's and Wilson's deaths should be regarded as sacrificial killings. Hence the killing of the scapegoat, in the mythical structure of the novel, far from restoring the community to its wellbeing, actually demands the sacrifice of a member of the community that was supposed to be saved. Indeed, as an act of reprisal violence, Gatsby's death demands retribution. There is no end to the cycle of violence, and rivalry and resentment are not purged from the community.

This article has traced in Fitzgerald's novel the evidence supporting Girard's hypothesis about the pattern of mimetic desire and sacrificial violence contained in myth. The sacrificial crisis set up in the novel does result as a consequence of the generalized mimetic rivalry that presents the characters as resentful opponents and thus as *careless* with regards to the social wellbeing of the community. But, as described, the resolution of the sacrificial crisis is truncated. As presented in *The Great Gatsby*, resentment is incurable and reciprocal violence is *pandemic*. The killing of the scapegoat, as discussed throughout this study, is the killing of the mediator of the other characters' desires. It is then the killing of a rival, an act of violence born out of jealousy and resentment. These negative, violent emotions, as hypothesized by Girard's anthropological theory of myth, certainly characterize the social crisis conveyed in the mythical narrative that gives shape to the story told by Nick. But in *The Great Gatsby*, the traditional structure of myth is transformed so that the mythical tale is completed without those negative emotions being relieved.

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