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Religious Language and Symbolism in The Great Gatsby’s Valley of Ashes

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, there are few, if any, characters displaying faith in God, the spirit, or principled ideals, yet a good deal of their bad behavior takes place directly under the unflinching gaze of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg at the valley of ashes. Moreover, although a symbol for God perched above the valley of ashes overlooks the human doings in Gatsby, there is not a single scene or mention in the novel relating to a religious institution or creed that affirms the importance of belief, moral conduct, or the spiritual life generally. Finally, even though references to “dust” and “ashes” abound in the novel, none of the characters in Gatsby are penitent nor likely to seek the blessed ashes that invite repentance in some Christian rituals. Even Nick Carraway, disgusted with humankind on his return to the Midwest, seeking a world that is “uniform and at sort of a moral attention forever,” (Fitzgerald 3) exempts himself (as well as Gatsby) from moral examination or censure, making his own repentance an unlikely project. Yet in this bleak moral landscape, one of Gatsby’s central religious symbols—“the valley of ashes”—has perhaps not received the degree of critical comment it deserves.

A number of commentaries have previously considered religious influence in Gatsby. Fitzgerald was raised a Catholic, and his writings have been analyzed for the influence Catholicism may have contributed to his work (Martin 664–65).1 More generally, commentators have periodically analyzed The Great Gatsby for the Christian religious symbolism the text and images exhibit (Dilworth 119; Johnson 20). The faded visage of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s gaze at the sad escapades of the novel’s characters has naturally drawn attention (Johnson 20–21; Schroeder 89), as has Gatsby as the figure of the “host” with its religious overtones (Bordewyk 141). Importantly, these commentators—unlike Martin—have found nothing distinctively Catholic in the symbols and images they have analyzed. In short, the question of Catholic influence in the work is an open one.

The valley of ashes—where some of the book’s central action takes place—has received little published critical examination. Clearly, this is an oversight, for the valley of ashes plays a principal role in the structure of the story. First, there is the physical propinquity of the Dr. T. J. Eckleburg advertising sign, with its own religious symbolism, built there by “some wild wag of an oculist” (Fitzgerald 24). Second, one relationship that precipitates a good deal of the action in the novel and stands as one of Fitzgerald’s primary symbols of the corruption of modern life arises there: Tom Buchanan’s affair with Myrtle Wilson (24–25). Third, the first death of a major character, Myrtle, takes place there under Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s yard high line of sight (137). Fourth, it is the site where Tom Buchanan discloses to George Wilson that it was Gatsby’s yellow car that killed Myrtle,
which leads, inexorably, to the novel’s denouement (140). Ultimately, the ashes—like the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg—are present at these scenes as a form of reproach. The ash heaps at the place that “hasn’t got any name” are not merely dirty physical waste (139); rather, they arguably remind us of the refuse of modern society of the human variety, un-blessed. Finally, it should be recalled that Fitzgerald’s initial working title for the book was Among Ash Heaps and Millionaires (Perosa 205, n. 19). The original title is apt since the scenes that take place at the valley of ashes collectively unite Fitzgerald’s major themes of hope, illusion, mortality, corruption, materialism, success, and failure.

A fresh reading of the scenes that take place at the valley of ashes reveals the important uses Fitzgerald made of the symbol. Chapter Two’s repeated invocation of the word ashes, its variations, and similar invocations of the word dust (or its variations and synonyms) brings to mind the Christian burial rite’s language—“dust to dust, ashes to ashes.” Located midway between the fictional West Egg, Long Island and New York City, where the railroad and a roadway converge, Fitzgerald describes the area as a “... fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens...” and “... ash-gray men swarm with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud...” whenever a new load of ashes arrives by railcar (Fitzgerald 23). On the next page, Fitzgerald notes the valley is “... bounded on one side by a small foul river” with a drawbridge that can delay trains for up to half an hour so that passengers must partake of the “dismal scene” (24). It is significant, as I’ve already suggested, that the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg peer down there and “... brood over the solemn dumping ground” (24–25).

Traditionally, critics have focused on the influence of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) as the primary progenitor for Fitzgerald’s “dumping ground” where the highway joins the rail line (Berman 45; Bryer 263). Curnutt, for example, observes that the desolate waste of the ash heaps may be fruitfully compared to the refuse strewn along the banks of the Thames (117–18). Although The Waste Land is undoubtedly a source of influence, its existence as one precursor does not limit the possibility that the valley of the ashes may have more than a single source of genesis. Both the ash heaps in Gatsby and the garbage in Eliot’s poem at lines 177–178 suggest a casual disposal of detritus without regard for the environment; that is, a form of carelessness that is voiced by Nick Carraway as one of the moral lapses of human action to be decried. More symbolically, both images can embody man’s alienation from nature or even the corrupting influence of modernity as the modern city (London/New York) discards its used abundance, willy-nilly, at the edge of what was formerly paradise (The Thames/Long Island). Fitzgerald, of course, makes this contrast explicit through Nick’s imaginative vision expressed on the very last page of his novel: “... the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world” (180). Finally, Fitzgerald explicitly calls the area “... the waste land...” as part of his description of the scene (24).

It does not seem reasonable or prudent that one should dismiss out of hand the potential religious significance of the valley of ashes simply because The Waste Land constitutes one possible source for Fitzgerald’s adoption of the image. Commentators have neglected to consider whether Fitzgerald’s own religious background imbued his choice of the ashes for depicting desolation with a hint of religious symbolism. Ashes, for example, form an important part of one of Catholicism’s signal ceremonies—Ash Wednesday—inaugurating the penitential period of Lent and ultimately leading to Easter. At the same time, it is apparent that not all of the images and references arising from the valley of ashes are exclusively Catholic, since most Christian religions imbue ashes with significance. The question of generally Christian or specifically Catholic influence in use of the “ashes” image in Gatsby is a conundrum that likely cannot be definitively resolved.
Fitzgerald signals the importance of the ashes and the setting of the valley of the ashes by the length of, and careful attention to, its description, including the number of uses of the word, its variations, or related words. Fitzgerald uses the word “ashes” three times in three lines to open his description at the start of Chapter Two (23). He then uses the word alone or in combination (ash-gray; ash heaps) or a variation (ashen) a total of nine times in under four pages (23–26). In addition to direct references, Fitzgerald repeatedly invokes colors and words that indirectly remind us of the ashes (23–25). He observes, for example, that the desolate scene is beset by a “powdery air” where a “line of gray cars” crawls along the “invisible” rail lines (23). There, above the “gray land” and amid the “spasms of black dust” sat Wilson’s Garage, home itself to a “dust-covered wreck of a Ford” (23–25). As Tom and Nick wait for Myrtle so they can all board the train to the city, a “gray, scrawny Italian child” is setting off firecrackers for the approaching Fourth of July (26).

The valley of ashes is also prominent as a setting during the car trip to New York in Chapter Seven (120–25). Here, Tom learns that George Wilson has discovered his wife is having an affair. Myrtle, locked in her room by George, peers out the upstairs window and sees Tom driving the yellow car. In this scene, too, the symbolism of ashes and dust is reasserted repeatedly. As they stop for gas, Nick notes, “we slid in to a dusty spot under Wilson’s sign”; Gatsby and Daisy, in the blue coupe, flash by “with a flurry of dust”; as they depart, Nick observes, “That locality was always vaguely disquieting . . .” (122–24). “Over the ashheaps the giant eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg kept their vigil . . .” (124).

The valley of ashes figures most prominently when Fitzgerald uses the setting for the event that inspires the book’s climax: the death of Myrtle Wilson, killed by the yellow car (137–40). These three scenes at the valley of ashes propel the underlying story that forms the moral spine of the novel. This close reading of the text suggests that religious allusions that arise from the ashes image are arguably central to Fitzgerald’s plan for the novel’s thematic development.

The fact that a death arises in the valley of ashes naturally turns our attention to the language in Genesis 3:19: “For dust you are, and unto dust you shall return” (www.sacredbible.org/catholic). Perhaps even more compelling, we recollect the words of one or another of the variations on the Christian burial service. The Book of Common Prayer language is common to American culture generally:

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (333)

However, the source in Genesis is neither exclusively Catholic nor exclusively Protestant, and the “dust to dust” language was common in Catholic burial prayers during Fitzgerald’s lifetime when the priest threw down a handful of dirt on the casket at the graveside (www.newadvent.org/cathen). The association between the valley of ashes setting, death and dirty business, and the “twin” themes of mortality and morality that pervade the novel seem plainly evident.

Furthermore, as Fitzgerald would have known from his early life, Ash Wednesday plays a pivotal role in Catholicism. The meaning of the ceremony is significant for understanding the adoption of “ashes” images in Gatsby. According to Catholic doctrine, the Wednesday after Quinquagesima Sunday is the first day of the Lenten fast. On this day, all the faithful approach the altar before the beginning of Mass. The priest dips his thumb into ashes produced by burning palm leaves blessed from the previous year’s Palm Sunday. The priest then applies the ashes in the form of a cross to the
penitent’s forehead accompanied by a paraphrased restatement of Genesis 3:19, “Remember man that thou are dust and unto dust thou shalt return.”

As Fitzgerald would also have known, the purpose of Lent is preparation for commemoration of the death, resurrection, and passion of Christ at Easter. A sixth-century letter written to introduce an early Catholic lectionary describes the lessons to be imparted by Lenten readings to include abstinence, penance, and purity (Pepler vi). Thus, a celebrant prepares himself or herself and anticipates the revival and redemption that the resurrection promises. Though the sacraments of the Catholic Church are reserved for communicants, those who wish to believe as well as the confirmed faithful may accept the blessed ashes in the form of the cross as a sign of repentance. The recipient is expected to meditate on pride, humility, compassion, discernment, patience, judging others, prayer, hospitality, charity, and like sins and virtues. Given the moral themes in Gatsby, and the three important scenes that take place in the valley of ashes, it seems likely that Fitzgerald very consciously chose the “valley of ashes” image, and placed the “eyes of God” there.

The link of the “ashes” to the novel’s themes invites us to ask: But what did God see at the valley of ashes? For the most part, God saw mankind fallen from grace into an ash-gray heap of earthly ambitions, illusory quests, and morally suspect conduct. To make the final connection between the ashes image and the arc of his story, Fitzgerald describes Wilson, seeking Gatsby to reek his vengeance, as “. . . that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward [Gatsby] through the amorphous trees” (161). The end result, as we know, is the catastrophe of Wilson’s mistaken killing of Gatsby as driver of the yellow coupe and then himself (161–62). Fitzgerald sums up these events by writing, “the holocaust was complete,” replete with images of burning and ashes that the word holocaust inspires (162). In this way, the religious meaning of the valley of the ashes merges with, and is integrally related to, both the novel’s central events and the primary themes Fitzgerald was pursuing. Taken as a whole, then, the constant presence of the ashes images acts to remind us there are few, if any, instances of humility, compassion, patience, or charity displayed by any character in the novel. This, in the end, is what the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg see and what Fitzgerald wants us to see.

Nick, of course, establishing Fitzgerald’s interest in moral themes, quite famously opens the book by quoting his father about “judging others”: “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone. . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages you’ve had” (1). However, Nick, too, ends up judging, telling Gatsby, “They’re a rotten crowd . . . You’re worth the whole damn bunch of them” (154). Although a generous sentiment, Nick’s comment shows little discernment, a quality the “unreliable narrator” (Cartwright 218) has exhibited throughout. Certainly, in extending to Gatsby, “who turned out all right in the end,” his confidence and esteem, Nick’s judgment is questionable (3). Nick’s belief that it was only what preyed on Gatsby, the “foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams,” that tainted him simply does not hold up (3). Yet it is once again the dust or ashes/dirt image that calls our attention to the moral basis for Nick’s observations and the novel’s themes generally. The “dust” in Nick’s distorted perspective only obscured the purity of Gatsby’s earthly vision. Of course, the truth is that what Nick extols as Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope” begets a self-delusion that, in the end, reveals itself as a tawdry sham (3). Gatsby’s material acquisitiveness will in the end, like all those beautiful shirts, merely turn to dust. Nick, though a flawed character in many respects, is perhaps the only character who evinces any example of a moral, if areligious, sensibility. It is Nick, after all, who leaves the East after Gatsby’s death, seeking a world at “moral attention forever,” and who feels most pointedly the painful absence of mourners at Gatsby’s funeral (2; 168–72; 174–75). In the end, however, although the novel is replete with references to “ridges and hills and grotesque gardens of ashes,” so many ashes as to create a
“fantastic farm” of them, and all blessed by the presence and “persistent stare” of the eyes of God (23–24), no ashes mark the foreheads of the characters in Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, including Nick, as none seek penitence. As religious allusions go, Fitzgerald could hardly have found a better one than the “valley of ashes” to join with the “eyes of God.”

Notes

1 The son of practicing Catholics, Fitzgerald fluctuated in his devotion to the church. His biographers note that he went through periodic cycles of devoutness interspersed with increasingly lengthy intermittent episodes of secular disregard. While nominally still a practicing Catholic during his years at Princeton, Fitzgerald reported to one contemporary that he could “go up to New York on a terrible party” and then come back to the church and pray “and mean every word of it, too!” (Mellow 34). Eventually, Fitzgerald left the church. In his notebook for 1917–18, he recorded, “Last year as a Catholic” (Brucoli 86; Mellow 6–7). According to Brucoli, Fitzgerald severed his ties with Catholicism “without a backward glance or lingering guilt” (92). Ultimately, permission to conduct the funeral service and bury Fitzgerald with his parents at St. Mary’s Church, Rockville, Maryland was denied, officially confirming his apostasy (Brucoli 488; Mellow 487).

2 Indeed, one can go so far as to point out that non-Christian religions—such as Hinduism—reserve a special sacred significance for ashes, although it is less likely Fitzgerald was locating his influence here.

3 “for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shall return” in the Protestant version. (Holy Bible, King James Version).

4 Subsequent to Vatican II (1962–65), the only common use of the “dust to dust” language in Catholic funeral services is in relation to cremation. Personal communication to author from Br. Boniface Lazzari, Saint Martin’s Abbey and University (March 15, 2013).

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