

# Sample Explication: Fiction

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## Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust The Death of the American Dream

My paper is based on a passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, "About halfway between West Egg and New York" to "[ . . . ] brood on over the solemn dumping ground" (23).

The most obvious symbol in *The Great Gatsby* is the "wasteland" called the "valley of ashes." I also found it to be the most interesting. The "valley of ashes" symbolizes the failure of the American dream and shows the human situation in an age of chaos.

Nick Carraway narrates this passage. Its atmosphere is very dark and desolate, and strongly contrasts with the lively, colorful narrative Nick gives us in the first chapter. The atmosphere especially contrasts with the bright, fast-paced world in which Gatsby lives, and in particular with his parties. Gatsby's colorful world represents his dream, while the "valley of ashes" represents reality; and so the "valley of ashes" helps the reader to realize just how artificial Gatsby's world is. This desolate land of ashes symbolizes sterility and waste. The narrative of the passage tends to evoke the emptiness and futility of America in the Jazz Age. It explores the theme of the corruption of the American dream by materialism.

The first paragraph continues with "the ash-gray men" of Fitzgerald's "gray land" raising "an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight." The real business of the wasteland that we are screened from is cruelty, suffering and violent death. The Wilsons mentally torture each other in this wasteland, and it is here that Myrtle Wilson is killed by the "death car" (138). The "line of gray cars" described at the end of the first paragraph also reminds us of the squalor and destructiveness of industrial civilization, and we see everything "crumbling" through the "powdery air." The "valley of ashes" symbolically represents the destruction of what was once the "green breast of the new world." Gatsby's and Nick's illusions of youth give way to the disillusionment of the thirties, and the green hope gives way to the dust of disappointment.

In the end, Gatsby's dreams turn to ashes, and it seems dramatically appropriate that George Wilson, who lives in the "valley of ashes," should be Gatsby's murderer. The idea that Gatsby's dream gives way to ashes, and that Wilson is the executioner of this dream, is made clear through descriptive detail. Nick says it was the foul dust that floated in the wake of Gatsby's dreams that

preyed on Gatsby. He refers to Wilson as "that ashen, fantastic figure gliding towards [Gatsby] through the amorphous trees" (162). When Myrtle Wilson is run over by Daisy, Nick describes the spot where Myrtle, "her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her dark blood with the dust" (138). When Nick and Gatsby enter Gatsby's house the morning after Myrtle's death, "there was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere" (147).

In the second paragraph there is the reference to the enormous "eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg." Dr. Eckleburg is an advertisement for spectacles, now faded and irrelevant, which watches over the "valley of ashes" where the ash-gray men "drift." "Drift" is a word used many times and it applies to all the main characters, including Nick. Tom and Daisy, the "moneyed" class, have for years "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." Jordan is a professional golfer and so she is constantly drifting from one tournament to another. Gatsby's dream causes him to drift, and Nick drifts east and eventually back west in the end.

The "eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg" are a very simple but significant symbol, which appears at certain crucial moments. The eyes are "blue and gigantic--their retinas are one yard high," painted on a billboard at the order of some long-since vanished oculist who probably "sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away." To Wilson, just before he mistakenly murders Gatsby, the eyes take on the character of an all-seeing God. But these giant eyes are unseeing, suggesting that the gods in *The Great Gatsby* are forever watching but forever blind. In fact, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about seeing and mis-seeing. Myrtle Wilson, for example, mistakes Jordan Baker for Tom's wife, and this leads eventually to the fatal accident when Myrtle runs away from Wilson and tries to stop what she wrongly thinks is Tom's car. Jordan fails to recognize Gatsby, even though she met him when he was courting Daisy. Wolfsheimer mistakes Nick for one of Gatsby's "business" associates. Gatsby, of course, is blinded by his dream. Nick, as narrator, continuously sees, and often mis-sees, what is going on. Nick, for example, mistakes Gatsby for just another of the house guests when he first meets him. At the end, we see even Nick has been blinded by the dream when Tom tells him that Gatsby "threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's" (180). And after Gatsby's death, Nick tells us "the East was haunted for me [. . .] distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction" (178).

The "valley of ashes" is a very important symbol in *The Great Gatsby*. It helps separate the blinding illusion of the American dream during the Jazz Age from the reality of the human situation caused by the corruption of the American dream by materialism and the worship of the new god of commercialism.