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**“A SECRET PLACE ABOVE THE TREES”: KEATSIAN IMAGINATION
IN FITZGERALD’S THE GREAT GATSBY**

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“A SECRET PLACE ABOVE THE TREES”:
KEATSIAN IMAGINATION
IN FITZGERALD’S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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By
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2019

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Introduction

For nearly a century, critics have been infatuated with the connection between the poetry of John Keats and the prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is no secret that Fitzgerald pays homage to Keats, his favorite poet, and, in a 1938 letter to his daughter, Fitzgerald instructed her to carefully read Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" because "in this poem is a phrase which will immediately remind you of my work" (*Life in Letters* 341). In the fourth stanza of the ode, Keats writes,

Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. (35-40)

The phrase referenced is "tender is the night," the title of one of Fitzgerald's novels. It immediately follows the speaker's transcendence into the world of the nightingale and imagined escape from the pangs of ephemerality. In the same letter, Fitzgerald admits there is another phrase that he "rather guiltily adapted to prose" in *The Great Gatsby* (342). From the same stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale," the phrase "But here there is no light, / Save from what heaven is with the breezes blown . . ." is reimagined by Fitzgerald into, "[Gatsby] lit Daisy's cigarette from a trembling match, and sat down with her on a couch far across the room, where there was no light save from what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall" (100). Like Keats's speaker who seeks a sense of transcendence through the power of his own imagination, Gatsby seeks to create a world

that transcends his circumstances. The sense of idealism and an imagined existence beyond the limits of realism permeate the work of both writers, and, despite living a century apart, Fitzgerald obviously found personal and artistic kinship with Keats.¹ Hence, there is a timelessness about Fitzgerald's work that is able to capture the spirit of the Jazz Age, while evoking the romanticism of those who came before him.

Fitzgerald uses highly poetic language and depicts romantic, natural settings amid the bustle of city-life, and his disillusionment with post-war American society is presented in an entirely different style of prose than that of his Modernist contemporaries. In the introduction for *Modern Critical Interpretations: F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, Harold Bloom contends that the novel "is anything but a 'period piece'" and "is the definitive romance of the American Dream . . ." (9). He goes on to say that other critics may argue whether the theme of the novel is "the withering of the American dream" or "a celebration of romantic hope in America despite all the ugly realities," but he believes that "Fitzgerald himself, as much a High Romantic as his favorite poet, John Keats, was too great an artist not to entertain both possibilities" (9). *The Great Gatsby* is revered as the definitive novel about the quest for the American Dream. Though that may be true, to consider that its chief accomplishment is reductive and disregards Fitzgerald's own quest to emulate the Romantic sense of Fancy, in particular, the "Keatsian imagination." This conceptualization, comprised of three interrelated ideas: negative

¹ In her article "The Emperor's New Clothes: Keatsian Echoes and American Materialism in *The Great Gatsby*," Rule-Maxwell discusses biographical similarities between the two and Keats's influence on chapter 5 of *The Great Gatsby*. Elaborating on the concerns of class among both authors, Rule-Maxwell writes, "For both writers, these images [of themselves as authors] were tied to upward mobility narratives and projections of class identity" (61). She also implies that Fitzgerald felt a kinship with Keats because "[b]oth authors' works invoked representations of themselves that relied upon a melancholia often related to contested relationships with women . . ." (61).

capability, the chameleon poet and the pleasure thermometer, is the essence of Keats's most illustrious poems.² Bloom, Rule-Maxwell, Sandy and Philip McGowan³ have all made substantial arguments recognizing the presence of, what Keats designated, "negative capability" in Fitzgerald's writing. However, academics have failed to comprehensively examine two other ideas at the core of Keats's works—works that Fitzgerald was irrefutably familiar with—the chameleon poet and the pleasure thermometer. The purpose of this essay is to display the calculated usage of the Keatsian imagination and its key concepts to evoke a definitive romanticism within Fitzgerald's modern novel *The Great Gatsby*.

Defining the Keatsian Imagination

In order to illuminate the depth of Keats's influence on Fitzgerald's novel, it is first necessary to present Keats's definition of the "imagination" and terminology associated with it. In an 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats situates the imagination in the scope of reality for the poet. "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not. For I have the same ideas of all our passions as of love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential beauty," Keats writes (1403).⁴ The fundamental association between beauty and truth is significant for Keats because

² Richard Woodhouse is the first critic to place emphasis on the Keatsian imagination. In an 1818 letter, Woodhouse states that Keats, by the power of his imagination, is able to "create ideal personages, substances, and powers" and "will be able to throw his own soul into any object he sees or imagines . . . and he will speak out of that object, so his own self will, with the exception of the mechanical part, be 'annihilated'" (1068). The process of self-annihilation that Woodhouse describes is what Keats refers to as "the pleasure thermometer," and it is experienced through a chameleon-like poet.

³ In his essay "Reading Fitzgerald Reading Keats," McGowan argues that negative capability is present in both the "formal structure" and "narrative content" of *Tender is the Night* and its epigraph taken from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (207).

⁴ This statement is later reimagined into the final words of "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

together the concepts lead to a union with the divine and an annihilation of the self—Keats's ultimate goal. In the same letter he states: "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found truth" (1404).⁵ Imagination is a vision of reality; Adam dreamt of Eve and awoke to find her. Therefore, according to Keats, if imagination is reality, it is also intrinsically linked to beauty, and beauty is then linked to that which is "truth." By that account, Keats's preoccupation with immortality and its relation to the creation of art is fitting.

A few weeks later, Keats uses the term *negative capability* in an 1817 letter to his brothers. In that letter, he defines the idea as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1405). For Keats, the ambiguity of this state is pleasant since possibilities swarm about in the creative process. To be negatively capable is to refuse rational and scientific answers in favor of existing in a state of uncertainty, and the uncertainty is what allows the creative process to occur. He continues on to assert "that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (1405). Keats uses the term "beauty" to refer to both the creative process and the aesthetic quality of poetry and, as a late romantic, uses the concept of negative capability to respond to and refute the Wordsworthian *poet*.

As defined in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* the Wordsworthian poet is a man "who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul" than other men (Wordsworth 536-537). Wordsworth's poet is a prophet-like figure that

⁵ Adam's dream is from the book of *Genesis*. God puts Adam to sleep in order to take a rib. Adam awakes to find Eve, created from his own rib.

possesses abilities outside the average man. Due to this “otherness,” the Wordsworthian poet is an awe-inspiring but isolated figure that Keats later dubs the “egotistical sublime” in an 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse. In the letter, Keats refutes the concept of Wordsworthian poet and redefines the role of the poet within society as a *chameleon*. He writes,

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical Sublime; which is a thing per se, and stands alone,) it is not itself — it has no self — It is everything and nothing — It has no character — it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto,⁶ be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated . . . What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity — he is continually in for and filling some other body. (1424-1425)

The chameleon poet is able to embody the state of negative capability. Keats’s poet successfully annihilates the self through the creation of art and, essentially, becomes one with the art. The chameleon poet concept permits the works of Keats to live on beyond the span of his own lifetime.

Finally, the pleasure thermometer is a process experienced through a chameleon poet who exists in the state of negative capability. The thermometer was conceived by Keats to seek the eternal through beauty. For Keats, his perennial problem is his own

⁶ Keats uses the term *gusto* in reference to Hazlitt’s 1816 essay “On Gusto” on which he states “Gusto in art is power or passion defining any object.” Wu suggests that for Hazlitt “Works of art are ratified by the artist’s ability to transcend the barriers of the self and embody another object or being” (1388). Wu’s statement served as inspiration for the subject of this essay.

mortality.⁷ In order to find happiness, he seeks a union outside of the self in order to experience a sense of immortality and a unity with the divine. The conceptualization of the thermometer is present throughout Keats's works, but it is specifically outlined in *Endymion* and explicitly referenced in an 1818 letter to John Taylor as "the greatest service to me of anything I ever did" (Wu 1401n1). The pleasure thermometer consists of four gradations that lead to happiness, divine fellowship and, most importantly, self-annihilation. Visually, *Endymion* suggests that the pleasure thermometer forms a crown "upon the forehead of humanity" with each gradation acting as a different part of the crown (803). The four degrees are: sensual enjoyment of nature, music, friendship, and passion (Wu 1401n1). Passion is "at the tip top" of the crown (805). As each stage is achieved, the self is annihilated until "we blend, / Mingle, and so become a part of it —" (811-812). A oneness with nature, music, friendship and love contrasts the isolated egotistical sublime because Keats urges for a co-mingling of the poet with that which surrounds him. By doing so, and thereby annihilating the self, the chameleon poet finds purpose.

Nick Carraway: The Negatively Capable Chameleon

The presence of the above three concepts in Fitzgerald's work is notable, and, as previously indicated, critics have been particularly concerned with his application of negative capability. Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby's* earnest Midwestern narrator, is a vehicle for both negative capability and the chameleon poet as defined by John Keats. In his article "Fiery Particle," Mark Sandy discusses Fitzgerald's portrayal of negative

⁷ Keats was aware of his own mortality after losing those close to him and being diagnosed with tuberculosis; consequently, the overarching sense of temporality works itself into much of his writing. The inscription on Keats's tombstone reads: "Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water"

capability. Sandy extends the scholarship of Keatsian analyses of Fitzgerald's novel by linking Nick specifically to negative capability. Although Nick does not believe the past is "recoverable" like Gatsby, he "exhibits a similar Keatsian capacity to live imaginatively in the private and intimate inner world of others" (Sandy 156). Chapter two of the novel strongly demonstrates Keats's concept as applied to Nick. The reader discovers the world of the characters through the perspective of "a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler," but Nick refuses to admit his participation in much of the debauchery, establishing himself as a chameleon-like vehicle for story-telling purposes (Fitzgerald 8). He considers himself "within and without" both "enchanted and repelled" by his interactions with the group (Fitzgerald 40). As he gazes out the window of the apartment shared by Tom and Myrtle, he recognizes that he is contributing to the "human secrecy" that a "casual watcher" might observe (Fitzgerald 40). Nick is uncertain of his role within the group but is compelled to stay. He is both an observer and participant, and, as the reader's guide, he allows the reader to experience the world of *The Great Gatsby* as he does.

Sandy describes Nick's participant and observer role as "a yearning for attachment and desperate isolation" and asserts that Nick's narrative style is both an example of modernity and of Keats's romanticism. Concerning Nick's description of life in New York, Sandy writes, "Nick is at once the objectively modernist commentator on the fragmented and alienated lives experienced by the city's inhabitants and subjectively absorbed into their inwardly felt lives of wasted opportunities and loneliness" while he also "exhibits a Keatsian subtlety through its palpable rounding out of 'those lost poignant moments of night and life'" taking on "an inwardly felt existence of [their]

own” (156-157). Sandy’s commentary applies to Nick’s role throughout the novel, displaying his *believed* ability to exist as objective narrator while he clearly participates within the group. For example, Nick willingly attends a party with Tom Buchanan’s mistress and facilitates the reunion of Gatsby and Daisy by hosting a tea in his cottage. Neither of those actions show objectivity because—despite his insistence otherwise—he is a key *character* in his own narration. This firmly establishes Nick as a version of the Keatsian chameleon; he takes on the “color” of his surroundings and exhibits a lack of identity. As Keats defines it, “he is continually in for and filling some other body” (“Letter to Richard Woodhouse” 1424). This allows Nick to attach himself to Gatsby’s story as both owner and raconteur.

An indispensable facet of Keats’s chameleon poet is self-annihilation. Nick’s self-annihilation does not occur due to an impartial stance as the narrator, but through Nick taking Gatsby’s story as his own throughout the course of the novel. As the novel begins, Nick recounts advice his father once gave him, but quickly turns his attention to “the man who gives his name to this book” (7). Later, Nick steps out of his narrative frame to provide a glimpse into Gatsby’s history. He states that Gatsby “told it to me at a time of confusion,” but Nick takes “advantage of this short halt . . . to clear this set of misconceptions away” (107). A reporter investigating Gatsby’s “notoriety” gets nowhere, which pleases Nick as he is the only person privy to the man beyond the rumors. By novel’s end, Nick has assumed ownership of Gatsby’s story. Before heading back to the middle west, Nick visits Gatsby’s mansion one final time. He takes a taxi to the house and theorizes “perhaps [the taxi driver] had made a story about it all his own. I didn’t want to hear it . . .” (188). Then,

On the last night, with my trunk packed and my old car sold to the grocer, I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight, and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspily along the stone. Then I wandered down to the beach and sprawled out on the sand. (188)

Nick, overwhelmed that his driver feels entitled to share any aspect of Gatsby's story, then sees that a vandal has scrawled an obscenity on Gatsby's property. The obscenity represents an extension of the already vast mythology surrounding the man Nick imagines only he truly knew. Nick deems himself solely qualified to adapt Gatsby's story—he claims ownership and makes Gatsby's story his own origin story of sorts. Due to this, he is unable to chronicle his own experiences without Gatsby's and feels a “scornful solidarity” with the titular character of his narrative (Fitzgerald 173). Nick's narrative has become one of Romantic idealism, not unlike Gatsby's, and, as Bloom argues, he thus saves himself “from the abyss of nihilism, as well as the pomposities of mere moralizing” (Afterthought 235). Nick exhibits a sense of self-annihilation and chameleon-like quality, and, by novel's end, he is caught between his, now seemingly idyllic, Midwestern upbringing and the cognizance that life in the east is not as as he had hoped it to be.

Jay Gatsby: The Keatsian Man of Imagination

In the 1936 essay “The Crack Up,” Fitzgerald describes “first-rate intelligence” as “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise” (*Esquire* 164). This statement by Fitzgerald reads as

a modern version of “negative capability” as Fitzgerald suggests a similar idealization related to what is uncertain and mysterious. Several years earlier, in chapter one of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway used the phrase “romantic readiness” to describe Jay Gatsby. Nick praises Gatsby’s sensitivity to “the promises of life” and his “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness,” while admitting that this vulnerability, or “foul dust that floated in the wake of his dreams” is what contributes to Gatsby’s downfall (6). Gatsby was unable to see a world beyond a determination “to make [things] otherwise.” This sentiment is echoed later in the novel as Nick propounds the inability to repeat the past. Gatsby, in disbelief, exclaims, “Can’t repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can!” (116). Again, even later, Gatsby returns to Louisville after the war to seek out Daisy and finds the city “pervaded with a melancholy beauty” (160). The character of Jay Gatsby here embodies negative capability—existing in two spheres—one of his own creation and the other of reality.

Nick initially describes the myth of Jay Gatsby in chapter six after a journalist futilely pursues information about West Egg’s most mysterious resident. James Gatz transforms from the son of an impoverished farmer to the ostentatious Jay Gatsby through the power of his own fancy. Regarding his fantasy, Nick says, “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” (105). Eventually, Gatsby meets Daisy and his “reveries” are no longer enough to satisfy his quest for greatness. Gatsby’s state of uncertainty is rooted in the dual existence of James Gatz and Jay Gatsby and his aspirations are rooted in fragility and unreality—the wing of a fairy—thus displaying his Keatsian negative capability. In the introduction

to his collection *Modern Critical Views: F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Bloom asserts that “By an effective troping of form, Fitzgerald made a book in which nothing was aesthetically wasted . . .” (2). Just as Keats was concerned with the power of “the sense of Beauty” for the poet, Fitzgerald creates characters who possess an “authentic aesthetic dignity” (2). Gatsby’s primary objective is one of idealism and aestheticism—a definitive romanticism. It is his inability to accept his own reality for what it is that leads to his demise—he demands Daisy admit that she never loved Tom so that they can escape to Louisville and be married as if five years had not passed. His romantic sensibilities are so resilient that Jay Gatsby cannot exist outside the world that he crafted in his imagination.

Nick considers the character of Jay Gatsby the “Platonic conception” of James Gatz. By making this comparison, Fitzgerald has solidified the existence of Jay Gatsby in the state of negative capability, or as Nick calls it “romantic readiness.” Gatz strives for a Platonic sense of perfection, consequently he is caught between two worlds much like Plato’s philosopher in the “Allegory of the Cave.”⁸ Gatsby’s boyhood voyage with Dan Cody allows Gatz to leave his “cave” of rural South Dakota and see that there is a greater truth that exists for him—even if it is not *real* or material to those outside his consciousness. The sense of ambiguity within Jay Gatsby’s two existences is how James Gatz is able to create a “a universe of ineffable gaudiness” (105) and also concerns the component of Beauty crucial to Keats’s negative capability and Fitzgerald’s “aesthetic dignity” (*Modern Critical Views 2*). According to Keats, “the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” concerning the creation

⁸ From book VII of *The Republic*, the allegory describes Plato’s theory of forms, the importance of philosophical exploration, and ignorance versus experience.

of great poetry. Or, in Gatsby's case, his aspiration to attain his lost-love Daisy requires that he obliterate the man that was born James Gatz.

“Already With Thee!”: The Quest for Transcendence

As specified earlier in this essay, the Keatsian imagination is embedded within some of Keats's most prominent poems. In order to securely position *The Great Gatsby* as a modern example of Keatsian romanticism, it seems necessary to look at Fitzgerald's novel as a companion to Keats's poetry. “Ode to a Nightingale” functions as significant inspiration for *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald wrote that he could “never read [‘Nightingale’] without tears in my eyes” (“Letter to Scottie Fitzgerald” 460-461). In chapter one of the novel, Daisy remarks “There's a bird on the lawn that I think must be a nightingale . . . He's singing away—” (20). The direct reference to the literary songbird solidifies the relationship between the two works and is a definitive nod to Fitzgerald's usage of the poem as source material. Keats's body of poetic work is full of examples of men questing for an unattainable woman.⁹ Why, then, utilize “Ode to a Nightingale”? Perhaps it is the almost mythological origins of the poem that inspired Fitzgerald. Numerous accounts indicate that Keats was inspired to write “Ode to a Nightingale” while hearing the song of a nightingale in the spring of 1819, sitting under a plum tree.¹⁰ The poem depicts a heartbroken speaker seeking solace from the pains of mortality. After considering vices as a remedy, he hears the song of a nightingale, that then provides poetic inspiration for the speaker. The speaker successfully escapes his world through

⁹ Examples include: *Lamia*, “Endymion,” “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” and Keats's sonnets.

¹⁰ From numerous sources, including Wu's biographical information on John Keats in his anthology *Romanticism*.

imagination, in fact through writing the poem, and enters the nightingale's state of immortality before the bird flies away.

On the surface, Keats's ode and Fitzgerald's novel depicting modern American society appear unconnected thematically. The two, however, share substantial similarities. The ode has been criticized as being meaningless beyond its beautiful diction. John Baker argues that "'Ode to a Nightingale' and Keats's poetry in general . . . were works rich in aesthetic pleasure but morally weak" (112). Seeking escape through sensuous experiences and the musical quality of the nightingale's song, the speaker in the ode is not unlike the titular character of Fitzgerald's novel. The other characters in the novel are equally as vapid as Baker suggests Keats's ode is. Nick—though considering himself exempt from the criticism—refers to other characters of his reminiscence as "careless and confused" (187). In his initial description of Daisy, the reader meets her first by hearing her "absurd, charming little laugh" (13) and later in the same evening Nick describes the superficiality of Jordan and Daisy:

Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire. They were here – and they accepted Tom and me, making only a polite, pleasant effort to entertain or be entertained. They knew that presently dinner would be over and a little later the evening too would be over and casually put away. (17)

The two women are succinctly characterized with nuanced but precise descriptions of their interactions during dinner. Acting as a Virgilian guide—passive but not without his own sins—for the reader into the world of New York society, Nick openly criticizes the

vapidity of the characters time and again. He even describes Gatsby as “[representing] everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (6). The major characters of the novel are all deeply flawed, yet Fitzgerald’s prose is able to effectively convince the reader to root for the criminal Jay Gatsby in his pursuit to win back the married Daisy Buchanan. Even Nick helps facilitate the affair, and, as Tom Buchanan correctly suggests, Gatsby “threw dust into” Nick’s eyes (187). *The Great Gatsby* is an aesthetically pleasing text due to Fitzgerald’s ability to employ opulent, poetic language, which draws the reader into the world of debauchery. The characters, however, lack a moral depth, much like Baker suggests about the speaker of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” The aestheticism of the novel coupled with the immorality of the characters provide an overarching thematic example of the Keatsian concept of negative capability.

In the case of “Ode to a Nightingale,” the speaker is heartbroken and seeks a type of joy to alleviate his pain. Gatsby’s experience is not unlike that of the speaker’s. In his article “‘The Self-Same Song that Found a Path’: Keats and *The Great Gatsby*,” Dan McCall associates Gatsby’s affinity for starlit nights with Keats. He states that “we so often see the title figure in his most characteristic pose, and it is the pose of the speaker in the Keats lyric: the man under the wandering stars who wants to comprehend and join his life to a precious being of eternal beauty” (46). Gatsby’s ability to dream a world of his own “grotesque” creation while sailing around the world with addict Cody firmly places him within the realm of the Keatsian man of imagination (105). It is not until Gatsby finds solace upon realizing “just how extraordinary a ‘nice’ girl could be” that he is provided a sense of certainty he had not otherwise experienced before (156). Prior to

meeting Daisy, Gatsby completed existed in an aura of negative capability—he was bound for greatness but without a clear purpose in mind.

Gatsby confesses that he did not originally intend to fall in love with Daisy Buchanan in 1917. Nick narrates that “Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (157). Once realizing that his quest for material success is of no comparison without a clear objective, he tells Nick: “Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn’t care. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?” (157). Gatsby parallels the journey of Keats’s speaker in “Nightingale” who longs to “. . . dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves has never known” (21). Eventually, he chooses Daisy over a solitary path by virtue of the hope that loving her will allow him to transcend into a world for which he feels destined and which will provide him the ability to leave “the hot struggles of the poor” behind him forever (157). Gatsby’s submission to his quest for Daisy mimics the speaker’s quest for poetic transcendence.

Keats’s speaker’s internal conflict is an example of negative capability as he wishes to exist with the nightingale and out of the earthly world of pain. He desires to “leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away into the forest dim . . .” under the auspices of the nightingale’s song instigating a type of poetic transcendence or immortality through the creative process (19-20). Shortly thereafter, the speaker exclaims:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! (31-35)

This shift happens suddenly; the speaker laments that he wants to be with the nightingale, but then abruptly realizes that he can be with her through the power of his own imaginative creation. Fitzgerald mirrors this realization in *Gatsby* by showing the depth of Gatsby's desires for his imagined Daisy. Once the two are reunited in chapter five of the novel, Nick states that "[Gatsby] literally glowed; without a word or gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room" (94). Then, of Gatsby's illusion, "It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (101). Throughout his five years of pining, Gatsby imagined the life he wanted with Daisy and created it. He believed he would find his way to her if he continued to create a reality based on his illusion. In his 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats constructs the analogy: "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found truth" (1404). This, precisely, is what Jay Gatsby endeavors to do. In his believed reality, once Gatsby acquires Daisy, he will fulfill his destiny as a "son of God" and achieve a sort of immortality through negative capability (104).

Once the speaker of Keats's ode merges with the nightingale, he exists in "embalmed darkness" surrounded by the trees and the song of the nightingale (43). The state of darkness represents the tension and uncertainties associated with negative

capability, and the imagined co-mingling of the speaker and the nightingale causes the speaker to crave the release of death. Death, a certainty for all of humanity, also leads to that which is the greatest uncertainty of all—the afterlife. While at the highest point of transcendence and negative capability, the release of death is appropriate. He says,

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. (51-60)

The speaker wishes to die now, not as a result of his heartbreak as referenced in the ode's opening lines, but because he has escaped to a transient state of beauty with the song of the nightingale. Death strikes the speaker as necessary at this moment since he has imagined himself to be unified with the song of the nightingale and no longer desires to exist within the constraints of mortality. The metaphorical escape to the world of the nightingale has led the speaker to believe that his heightened senses allow for the ultimate transcendental experience—the state of immortality and a total annihilation of the self. Therefore, an end to earthly existence would not interrupt his transcendence beyond the limits of mortality—paralleling the role of the song of the nightingale. The nightingale's

song is referred to as a “requiem” that has always been present and will continue as a “plaintive anthem” even if the speaker ceases to exist (60, 75).

Gatsby’s inability to see beyond himself, to really see Daisy—not his platonic conception of Daisy—is what leads to his death. At the end of the novel Nick says,

He did not know that it was already behind him . . .

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . (189)

McCall likens the nightingale’s requiem to Gatsby’s realization that his “his dream [is] ‘already behind him’ . . .” allowing “The nightingale’s song and the green light to flow into richly storied scenery. . .” (56). As Gatsby continues to search for the “irrecoverable lost, personal moment” that went into loving Daisy, his true objective is to parallel the transcendent experience of the speaker in “Ode to a Nightingale.” Nevertheless, Gatsby cannot reach the state of transcendence like Keats’s speaker does. His journey stops short because his idea of Daisy “tumbled short of his dreams” (101), and Dickstein argues that “Gatsby yearns for a fullness of being, an emotional transcendence, that is at once uplifting and impossible to sustain, intoxicating but finally disillusioning” (5). Gatsby’s dedication to his dream is so penetrating and his conception of Daisy is so intensely fabricated that his quest is unachievable. Unlike the speaker of Keats’s ode, Gatsby is incapable of admitting the limitations within his imagined illusion and thus cannot achieve an authentic sense of transcendence.

Due to the intense dedication to his quest, the reformulated persona of “Jay Gatsby” ceases to exist once he cannot acquire Daisy. McCall writes, “In the work of

Keats the love of beauty becomes so intense, wrought to such a pitch, that it becomes almost indistinguishable from pain. Complete fulfillment is death” (48). The search for a beauty that matches the capacity of his imagination is futile. Nick establishes this as he describes the moment Gatsby kisses Daisy and “forever weds his unutterable vision in her perishable breath” (117). McCall suggests that the “essence of Gatsby’s vision is willful ignorance, a refusal to recognize the unalterable distances of the world” (52). Nick reflects on the moments before Gatsby’s death and theorizes “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [Daisy’s phone call] would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true, he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (169). In this sense, Keats’s speaker and Gatsby are analogous characters—both only able to exist to their fullest potential due to the nightingale’s song with Daisy as Gatsby’s nightingale-figure. Sandy suggests that negative capability “can as easily destroy as create fictions of the self” (162). The power of imagination that both the speaker and Jay Gatsby exhibit make greatness, or the ability for it, a possibility. However, as in the case of Jay Gatsby, Sandy rightfully argues this imaginative power can also lead to destruction.

Daisy Fay: The Imagined Nightingale

It would be remiss not to explore the relationship between the muse-like songbird of Keats’s ode, a tragic-figure, and Fitzgerald’s Daisy. Stemming from a classical myth, the story of Philomela¹¹ is a tale of rape and retaliation. Ravaged and mutilated by her brother-in-law, Philomela and her sister enact vengeance by committing infanticide and feeding the slaughtered child to his father. Philomela, deprived of the ability to speak, is

¹¹ “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

transformed into a nightingale at the end of the story allowing her to sing of her sorrows for all eternity. The nightingale became a symbol of lamentation until the romantics, poets like Keats, began to adopt the bird as a symbol of poetic inspiration.¹² Daisy Buchanan, a tragic character in her own right, can be read as Fitzgerald's rendering of the nightingale. In chapter one, Nick says that Daisy's face is "sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth" (13-14), but her physical appearance is rarely mentioned throughout the rest of the novel. Her voice, however, is noted nearly every time Nick interacts with her. Throughout the novel Daisy's voice is described as a "deathless song" (101), "playing murmurous tricks in her throat (111), "a husky rhythmic whisper" (114-115), a "low thrilling voice . . . as if each speech is an arrangement of notes" (13), "glowing and singing" (19), "a clear artificial note" (91), and its many fluctuations are described as "the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it" (127). In "Ode to a Nightingale," the speaker believes that the "immortal Bird" (61) "singest of summer in full throated ease (10)," and achieves a sense of "ecstasy" while "pouring forth thy soul" (57-58) interpreting the song of the nightingale as one of joy despite the tragic nature of her circumstance. The nightingale's voice is representative of immortality and music and of joy and pain; Daisy Buchanan's voice functions in the same way. Both the speaker of Keats's poem and Fitzgerald's Gatsby are enraptured by the song.

Out of the tragedy that brought about Philomela's fate, beauty is created and used for poetic inspiration. The song of the nightingale is "immortal" yet fleeting. When the speaker is abruptly drawn out of his imagination he exclaims, "Forlorn! The very word is

¹² Numerous poets such as Shakespeare, Milton, Radcliffe, Blake, Coleridge Wordsworth, Shelley, Eliot and others have written works referencing the nightingale and Philomela.

like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!” (71-72). He then asks “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). As the bird’s song fades away, the speaker questions the reality of his experience. His uncertainty occurs just as abruptly as the earlier shift when he exclaims “Already with thee!” (35). Bloom emphasizes that “Fitzgerald consciously culminated a Keatsian version of the quest. The man of imagination, however comprised, quests perpetually for an immortal female, more daemonic than human” (*Modern Critical Views* 3). Like Keats’s nightingale, Daisy’s vocal characterization as siren-like supports Bloom’s claim that Gatsby’s perpetual quest is an unattainable yet immortal female.

Utilizing Daisy Fay as a nightingale-like muse effectively contrasts the doomed Keatsian man of imagination; however, Daisy is not entirely unlike Gatsby. She, too, is employs her imaginative power to escape her reality. Early on in the novel, she describes the birth of her daughter and remarks “—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (21). Daisy presents a certain image of herself to the world, complete with her own entrancing, song-like voice. However, her reality is much different. She is not the “beautiful little fool” that she wishes her daughter to be; she is aware that her husband is having an affair. She even offers Tom her “little gold pencil” to write down any addresses at Gatsby’s party (112). Much earlier on, she admits to Nick that she is “pretty cynical about everything” (21). Daisy has created her own world of illusion, albeit not as faithfully constructed as Gatsby’s. In “Ode to a Nightingale,” the speaker ponders the world in which he exists, “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow” (27). He believes that the nightingale has no unhappiness since it is able to exist in a natural and immortal realm. He, on the other hand, is full of unhappiness because his world is “where

palsy shakes a few . . . Where youth grows pale” (25-26). He is wise to the heartache of a mortal existence in the same way that Daisy is. For the sake of a happier life, Daisy truly wants her daughter to be foolish; by that logic, her daughter is almost guaranteed a more content existence. By no means is Daisy foolish, but she yearns to be as a method of coping with the life she has chosen. It is only when she ceases the guise of being a fool, admitting her affair and confronting Tom, that she ends up in a situation beyond her control and outside the limits of her illusion.

Daisy, the nightingale of the novel, continues to exist in a state of illusion even after Gatsby cannot. She has the ability to continue her life without much deviation from her status quo; likewise, the song of the bird fades away in the final stanza of the ode. Once Daisy is unable to admit that she never loved Tom, he recognizes that her affair with Gatsby is over. Later the same evening, she and Tom presumptively scheme “opposite each other at the kitchen table” to frame Gatsby for the death of Tom’s mistress (152). The life of Daisy is able to return to its normative state—that of illusion—contrasting Gatsby’s demise. By novel’s end, the reader is able to decipher that although both characters live in a reality of their own creations, Daisy’s power and transcendence are largely imagined by Gatsby.

Frozen in Time: Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

The final component of the Keatsian imagination is the pleasure thermometer, and its presence within *The Great Gatsby* is especially significant. “Ode to a Nightingale” is a pleasure thermometer reenactment; Keats’s speaker experiences each gradation outlined in *Endymion*: sensual enjoyment of nature, music, friendship and passion. The ode encompasses a sensory experience as the speaker looks to transcend mortality and find a

divine union with the nightingale. Perhaps even more so, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a pleasure thermometer reenactment further connecting Fitzgerald's novel to Keatsian imagination. The ekphrastic ode, also from 1819, focuses on the idealization of ancient art and its timelessness. It depicts a speaker admiring an urn that displays two scenes: two lovers on the brink of a kiss and a religious ceremony with an animal sacrifice. As illuminated by Wu, the ode begins in a "meditation" in which "the poet has already transformed into an alternative reality" (*Romanticism* 1392). To illuminate Wu's point, the following is the first quatrain of the the ode:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme. (1-4)

Admiring the ancient art, the speaker celebrates the perfection of the urn embodying "silence and slow time," or the eternal. The speaker exists in the state of negative capability, and the world of the urn is one that "frailties such as sickness, age and death are transcended; in which human passion never fades; in which creativity continues indefinitely . . . In other words, the idealized reality created by a long dead Greek artist transports the poet to a place of perfection" (Wu 1392). The speaker experiences each step of the pleasure thermometer throughout the first half of the ode. Its high point, the divine union, occurs in stanza three when the speaker exclaims, "More happy love! more happy, happy love! / Forever warm and still to be enjoyed" (25-26). According to the speaker, the love depicted in the ode is transcendent. Human love, however, is transient and leaves the heart "high-sorrowful" and "cloy'd" (29). The second half of the ode is a

descent from the pleasure thermometer once the speaker realizes that he has been teased into a near-divine union. Referring to the urn as “Cold pastoral!” signifies the realization that the speaker has been merely lured into a false-sense of self-annihilation and immortality (45). He has not, in fact, transcended beyond the limits of mortality as he had hoped to do. The realization is the impetus for the speaker’s descent down the pleasure thermometer and acceptance of his own ephemerality. The poem ends with the statement: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50). Consequently, the “truth” suggested by Keats is that the beauty of the urn is eternal and has a level of permanence since it can reveal the same message to all.

“A Secret Place Above the Trees”: The Precipice of Pleasure

The tension between transience and the eternal conjured in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is essential to understanding Keats’s influence on *The Great Gatsby*. This is no more evident than in chapter six of the novel. As previously noted, chapter six provides an origin story for Jay Gatsby recounted by Nick Carraway, the chameleon poet. At the end of the chapter, Nick recounts the story of Daisy and Gatsby in 1917 for the reader. Nick believes that Gatsby’s quest for Daisy is really a quest to find the greatest part of himself that he sacrificed by choosing to love her. Right before recounting Gatsby’s memory, Nick says:

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. . . .
(117)

According to Nick, Gatsby has been searching for something that he cannot quite define for the past five years. He believes recreating his experience with Daisy in 1917 will help him discover what it is he lost. According to Dickstein the experience signifies a type of “metamorphosis” or “transcendental leap” for Jay Gatsby (4). Dickstein’s assertion is correct, but, extending the idea even further, Gatsby experiences a type of self-annihilation. The following passage is the apex of Keats’s influence on Fitzgerald’s novel. The passage acts as a pleasure thermometer reenactment and alludes to both “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Here is Nick’s account:

. . . One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees — he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck

upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (100)

The “evocative and poetic” passage—the epitome of Fitzgerald’s poetic prose—is a turning point in the novel (Dickstein 5). The moment of change and the impetus for Gatsby’s five-year quest are revealed in the span of two paragraphs. As McCall writes, “Both Keats and Fitzgerald posit an idea of the beautiful moment, testing it and understanding it against the forces of time” (523). Fitzgerald has certainly created a “beautiful moment” that still very much exists as part of Gatsby’s reality. Dickstein’s commentary implies that Gatsby once again exists in a Keatsian negatively capable imagination. The two young lovers find themselves in a natural setting lit by moonlight and young Gatsby can only reach “a secret place among the trees” if he intends to go alone. This secret place is unknown to Gatsby, but it seems to be whatever greatness Jay Gatsby was capable of reaching prior to falling in love with Daisy Buchanan. That, however, would have been a solitary path. Gatsby is ostensibly aware of the significance of this moment for the course of his life which is why he “wait[s], listening for a moment longer to a tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star.” In the end, he chooses Daisy over his own “greatness,” understanding that “his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (100). He then spends the next five years attempting to recreate this moment in order to find again “a secret place among the trees” (Fitzgerald 100). Gatsby lacks the wherewithal to admit that this clandestine place is unattainable, and he is too far gone to see another path for himself.

Once Gatsby reunites with Daisy in 1922, his pursuit has become a recreation of the mystical moment. This is why, in chapter five, Nick notices that “a faint doubt had

occurred to [Gatsby] as to the quality of his present happiness” (101). And, after their reunion in chapter five, Nick suggests,

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (101)

Although Gatsby had spent several years earning a fortune and making a reality out of his illusionary life, she cannot possibly live up to his expectations. The only version of Daisy that Gatsby can be content with is the version of her that he knew in 1917 in Louisville. This is precisely why it is difficult for Gatsby to see Daisy with a child, and why he so desperately wants Daisy to admit that she never loved Tom. Unfortunately, Gatsby allows his dream to supplant reality.

Furthermore, chapter five contains the moment Fitzgerald “rather guiltily adopted” from Keats. Once again: “He lit Daisy’s cigarette from a trembling match, and sat down with her on a couch far across the room, where there was no light save what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall” (Fitzgerald 100). Gatsby lights Daisy’s cigarette from a “trembling” match signifying the fragility of Gatsby’s plan and his intent to play creator. The only other illumination in the room is light bouncing off the floor, emulating Keats’s words:

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;

But here there is no light,

Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. (36-40)

The speaker of Keats's ode imagines himself finding solace with the bird while immersed in the forest. For both the speaker and the Gatsby of 1917, the moment occurs in a natural setting, under the tree and moonlight. Gatsby, too, looks up to the trees and imagines a ladder in which he could reach the secret place with nature. Like the speaker, the place can only be reached individually. For the speaker, his pain is the impetus, for Gatsby it is his quest for greatness, or his need to be released from the "pain" of being impoverished James Gatz. Fitzgerald manipulates the words of Keats to inspire Gatsby's desire to imaginatively recreate the perfect moment. As McCall argues, "His vision had provided 'a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality' and promised him that the solid earth was finally malleable, if only his dream could be sufficiently large and intense" (528). Unfortunately, Gatsby's dream does become "large and intense," so large that he is unable to fulfill it despite his best efforts. The Gatsby of 1922 sparks a flame—manmade light—in a dim room within his mansion. He attempts, futile as it may be, to become "a son of God" (104) once again and reenact the moment at the brink of fall in 1917 as the two young lovers stood on the moonlit path.

For both authors, Keats and Fitzgerald, an immortal moment of anticipation is the focus. Jay Gatsby desiderates to recreate the moment from 1917 as it is transformative for him. Keats's speaker describes a moment actually frozen in time on a work of art—Gatsby's telos. McCall asserts that "Fitzgerald conceives of truth in this novel much as Keats does in his poem on the Grecian Urn: those semi-tragic, semi-historical poses of

immaculate desire where love is ‘forever warm and still to be enjoyed’” (528). Nick’s presumption is that Gatsby considers the moment with Daisy to be frozen in time just as Keats’s speaker admires the everlasting beauty of the urn. This becomes, as McCall suggests, “truth” to Gatsby and also aligns with Keats’s characterization that implies imagination is “truth.” As Nick ends the reminiscence he says:

Through all [Gatsby] said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something — an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man’s, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (117)

Critics have suggested that the “fragment of lost words” is from another work of Keats, perhaps “The Eve of Saint Agnes” or *The Fall of Hyperion*,¹³ but I argue that Nick seems to be remembering “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Gatsby acts as a stand in for the speaker experiencing each stage of the pleasure thermometer. Gatsby, unlike the speaker of the ode, does not realize that human passions cannot compete with the transcendence of art. He is frozen at the high point of the poem, the near-divine union, believing that his love with Daisy is “For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd” (Keats 26). The momentous scene between Daisy and Gatsby encompasses all that is Keatsian about Fitzgerald’s novel: Nick acts as the chameleon poet as he searches for “a fragment of lost words” and Gatsby

¹³ McCall suggests “The Eve of Saint Agnes” is “the fragment of lost words” (117) as both texts “are drenched in a spirit of ancient revelry” (48). Bloom suggests a passage from *The Fall of Hyperion* in which “the poet-quester is nearly destroyed by his silence and inability to move” and likens it to Nick’s silence (*Afterthought* 235-236).

annihilates himself as he chooses to “forever wed” his greatness to Daisy’s “perishable breath” (117-118).

Concluding Thoughts

Associations between the poetry of Keats and the prose of Fitzgerald have been well-documented through critics, but what this study has tried to demonstrate is that the influence of Keats’s ideology on Fitzgerald’s work extends far beyond aestheticism and imagery. In his most well-known text, Fitzgerald consciously emulates the fundamental concepts that are embedded in Keats’s body of work: negative capability, the chameleon poet and the pleasure thermometer. Nick Carraway is a stand in for Fitzgerald’s Midwestern sensibilities and Keats’s chameleon poet; Jay Gatsby exhibits the idealistic side of Fitzgerald and embodies the negatively capable modern Romantic; finally, Daisy Buchanan is the immortal songbird of Keats’s ode inspiring both the ecstasy of the creative process and the pain of idealism. Though a work representing the disillusionment of the Modern era, Fitzgerald could not have conceived the novel in the way that we know it without the Keatsian imagination. In a 1940 letter to his daughter, Fitzgerald wrote that “after you quit Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming” (*Life in Letters* 461). For the modern reader, Fitzgerald’s prose has the same effect.

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