Christina Montoya

Professor Hofer

The Norton Scholar's Prize

11 April 2008

Words: 2,584

Gone to the Dogs:

How the American Dream Kennels Myrtle Wilson in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, all characters represent different facets of the American Dream with regard to social status, financial status, or both. Jay Gatsby himself is often interpreted as a symbol for the American Dream because of his rise in both social and financial status, while Tom Buchanan is just the opposite in that he represents inherited wealth and the established power that comes with it. By drawing such symbols and connections with the characters, the novel suggests a working definition of the American Dream, which is that a person can create his or her own successes, unconstrained by anyone else or any outside circumstances such as prestigious birth. The institutional convention of inherited wealth assumes that a person's status is pre-defined and cannot be changed by the individual. Tom is one of the few characters who has a fixed identity because of his own knowledge of the status he receives from his long-established wealth. One character makes an argument against the idea that one can create his or her own character completely on his or her own, and it is not Gatsby. While all the characters relate to the American Dream in terms of social or financial status, Myrtle is the only one who tries to live out its ideals and ends up contradicting it. Her goal is to rise socially and financially, and in her death, she reaches a level that is lower than her starting point. Myrtle, unlike Gatsby or even Nick, tries to raise her status but she remains a disposable

parasite, a creature feeding only for a time at Tom's whim. Her failure to reach her goal of social prominence and financial gain shows that the novel is "a moral lesson on the excesses and failures of a certain America and – perhaps – the American Dream itself" (Larson 285). Myrtle's unhappy plight is a direct rebuke to the dubious promises of the American Dream.

Myrtle is married to George Wilson, an impoverished owner of a small gas station. Her tragic experiences parallel Jay Gatsby's but on a smaller scale. Both characters seek to raise their status (both social and financial and not just one), but Gatsby's wealth obviously dwarfs Myrtle's. In addition, Gatsby is completely unrestricted by other people, whereas Myrtle's social and financial status is contingent on Tom. Instead of acquiring a fortune, Myrtle is Tom's mistress. While Myrtle would like to think that being Tom's mistress elevates her significantly (and somewhat nearer to Daisy's official position), she is more like the puppy that Tom buys for her in that she goes from being impounded at her husband's place to being owned by Tom. So while Myrtle's ownership of the dog features largely in her scenes that she is in after she buys the dog, she is owned in turn. Tom can see through her attempts to elevate herself because he thinks of her as nothing more than his mistress (he even breaks her nose when she mentions his wife's name), just as he can tell the breed and sex of the dog that Myrtle gets him to buy for her (Fitzgerald 37). Thus, Myrtle is nothing more or greater than the "bitch" of a dog whose ten dollar purchase price can "buy ten more dogs" (28). Since Tom treats Myrtle as nothing more than a possession, one can see that "sooner or later human feelings (in this case, Myrtle's ambitions to become someone greater) are negotiated in relation to property or some other form of material reality subject to ownership" (Callahan 382). Since Tom shows no hesitance in breaking Myrtle's nose nor regret in his action after the fact, it makes one wonder whether Tom even esteems Myrtle as a mistress. By breaking her nose, Tom illustrates that he has no reason

to provide personal care toward her – even in the small amount that Myrtle bestows on her dog. Thus, Myrtle has not only been degraded to being someone's mistress, she is even being degraded to the same or lower status that an animal would hold.

The dog, which Tom has just purchased to please Myrtle, immediately reappears in the next scene, an impromptu afternoon party with Tom, Nick, Myrtle, and others in the apartment Tom provides for Myrtle in New York. Once again, her insignificance is underscored. This time, an elevator boy brings a box of straw and some milk for the dog. When he does this, he also adds some dog biscuits to the milk, "one of which decomposed apathetically in the saucer of milk all afternoon" (Fitzgerald 29). The biscuit, even though it lacks action, is now highlighted in its dying moment. The biscuit cannot express affect, yet here it is anthropomorphized, a direct contrast to Myrtle's dehumanization. Myrtle's dog, a mongrel, receives more care and proper handling than she does; after all, no one seeks to break the dog's nose. The callous treatment toward Myrtle serves as a foil for the heightened level of care the mongrel receives. Myrtle is lower than the dog. She is commensurate to the biscuit, the item generally eaten and enjoyed by the animal but now left to decompose. Myrtle more directly decomposes apathetically; few people mourn her death (137). Along with her physical death, Myrtle's dreams of becoming someone greater than she is are brought to a halt, and her insignificance once again arises. Because of the way she dies, Myrtle becomes "road kill," the result of unleashed impulses. Her being mourned by few people could be attributed to her low social and financial status or because few people knew her to begin with. Jordan Baker, for example, explains to Nick that Tom has a mistress in New York, and no character provides further explanation about who the "some woman" might be (15). Not only is it improper to refer to someone as "some person," one

might expect Jordan to give more detail about this character if she makes it a point to tell Nick that Tom is involved with this person.

The narrator doesn't even describe Myrtle's death. He simply relates that one moment Myrtle is shouting, and the next moment "the business was over," as though her death was just something that needed to get done (Fitzgerald 137). Even though Nick, who wasn't there, describes the scene, he could have elaborated on the description by, for example, explaining what other people were doing at the time that the incident happened. Nick's description, in its abruptness and ruthlessness, suggests a certain brutal contempt. Nick could be demonstrating this contempt because of how it relates to Tom's disregard for his marriage to Daisy, Nick's cousin, but it more generally sheds light on the universal view on Myrtle. She is "some woman" to Jordan and more attention is given on her corpse than on the way she died (15). Wilson's neighbor Michaelis was unable to discern the color of the car that hit Myrtle, yet it is vividly described that "her left breast was swinging loose like a flap and there was no need to listen for the heart beat" (140-41). This description, in fact, brings to light questions about Nick and his credibility as a narrator. Since only two characters die throughout the entire novel, one would expect Nick to put more emphasis on this first death. Instead, he treats Myrtle almost the same way that the other characters do. While he does consider her a person (unlike Tom or Jordan), he does not give her a respect given to most other humans.

Like Myrtle, few people mourn Gatsby. While many people attended his parties when he was alive, almost none of them even acknowledge knowing him after his death. However, Gatsby did not make it a point of being a central part of his parties; at his parties, very few people had seen him there. Nick is shocked to learn that he has just spoken with Gatsby himself (Fitzgerald 48). This aspect of Gatsby's personality contrasts greatly with how Myrtle is at

social gatherings; she is even the subject of a photograph that Mr. McKee is planning. However, Gatsby also uses photography to support his identity when he shows Nick photographs of what he has done throughout his life; thus both characters are similar in that "photographs … supplant them" (Barrett 542). Myrtle however, articulates other conventions into her scheme of making others think she is someone who she is not. When Myrtle, with Tom and Nick, enters New York, she makes a great deal of purchases – including a dog – and relates all of the things that she "got to" do, such as invite the McKees and her sister up to the apartment (Fitzgerald 28-9). Instead of sounding grand and in control of the situation, the use of "the 'I got' idiom betrays Myrtle's origins" (Donaldson 193). Before that, when it is time to get a taxi, "she let four taxicabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with gray upholstery" (Fitzgerald 27). So while Gatsby does hold frequent, lavish parties, he does not make it a point of being the center of attention at them, whereas Myrtle does try to do just that. While she "exercises her discrimination" for a taxicab in order to appear grand, she instead chooses one that is "not quite a circus wagon, but unseemly in its showy color" (Donaldson 192). Her choice might be considered "gaudier to attract the female's eye for ornamental beauty" than Gatsby's "circus wagon" (Bender 418, Fitzgerald 124). On the other hand, the only thing that betrays Gatsby's origins is another person's knowledge of his history; when Nick doesn't know anything about Gatsby, he only sees a large house with equally large parties.

Behind Myrtle's grand projection of herself is a hollow layer that accompanies the value of her purchases and her social manner. For example, while she does buy magazines, cream, and perfume, there are details to each item that degrade their worth. First of all, each item is purchased from a drug store (where merchandise is fairly inexpensive), and not a department store (where items run for a much higher price). The magazines that she buys are nothing more

than the *Town Tattle* (a gossip magazine) and “a moving-picture magazine.” The next thing that Myrtle looks to purchase is a dog. While she states that she would love to have a police dog for the apartment, the dog that she does choose is gradually degraded in the ensuing verbal exchange. First, the seller relates that “it’s not exactly a *police* dog” and that “it’s more of an Airedale.” However, Nick notices that the dog has startling white feet, which is an automatic fault against this breed’s standards if it were being judged at an event such as a dog show. Nick also notices that the man passes his hand over the brown coat that makes up the “washrag of a back” (Fitzgerald 27). According to the standards by which this breed is judged and evaluated, the coat is defined as more of a tan color (since brown can be anything from a very light shade to almost black), and the coat is hard, dense, and wiry. In fact, the breed wasn’t even approved and recognized by the American Kennel Club until July of 1959 – much later than the roaring 1920s (AKCa). So even if the dog did have some Airedale in it, it would be nothing better than having Chihuahua blood. The Chihuahua was not an approved breed until October 1990, and it is the only dog bred for no specific purpose; all other dogs were bred to help humans in some way, by doing tasks such as retrieving or locating game, helping maintain cattle, or swimming for the purpose of retrieval or rescue (AKCb). Since neither the Chihuahua nor the Airedale were officially recognized breeds at the time the story takes place, Myrtle’s Airedale “look-alike” is no better than the Chihuahua in the eyes of people who take pride in owning purebred dogs, the people Myrtle wants to impress or join the ranks of.

Myrtle, who was initially searching for a great breed, happily settles for this dog before it gets degraded one more time by Tom. While Myrtle doesn’t put too much weight on the question by the “delicate” tone that she uses, she asks if the dog is a boy or a girl (Fitzgerald 28). After the man gives his response, Tom disputes it and sarcastically gives the man his payment.

Tom adds that the payment that he forfeits is enough to buy ten more dogs of the same low caliber (i.e., a mongrel bitch). Myrtle's physical projection works much the same as the dog's in that it is hard to tell what social status she belongs to at first glance; one must take a closer look (although not too close, given her purchases at the drug store and her acquisition of a "mongrel bitch") to see her true self. As previously noted, she may not immediately seem like a gas station owner's wife, there are aspects about her that display her true economic and social status. For example, her diction alone gives her status away. She states, "And, of course, I got to call up my sister, too," when she talks about who she must invite to the apartment (29). The primary word and phrase that gives away her status is "got" and "got to," which she uses several times. For example, when asking if the dog seller might have police dogs, she whines, "I don't suppose you got that kind" of dog (27). Myrtle had brought up telephoning her sister before this, and even then she uses words in a way that a wealthy lady would not when she boasts, "She's said to be very beautiful by people who ought to know" (28). Not only does Myrtle use a nonstandard word (i.e., "ought"), she doesn't even know who exactly she is talking about when she refers to people who would judge beauty.

On the surface, Myrtle Wilson is just like most of the other characters in that she wants to be someone greater than she is in regards to social and economic status. However, her true status always seems to penetrate through her self-important projection. She is unlike Nick and Gatsby in the quest for elevation in that she lacks a goal other than simply becoming rich and socially known. She projects a more realistic version of the American Dream than Gatsby, "Fitzgerald's elegant hoodlum," because very few people can come upon the same kind of wealth that he did, especially since he attained his wealth with connections to people like Meyer Wolfsheim and by "fixing" things to his advantage (Douglas 372). In addition, Myrtle, like many people, strives for

something greater, but then later settles for something of a lower caliber (e.g., her low-bred dog and being Tom's mistress). Her doing this, on top of being essentially owned by other people, demonstrates that, contrary to what the American Dream might suggest, people do not have complete power over their own status. It only takes one other person, in fact, to arrest a person's ambitions of elevating his or her social or financial status. In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the American Dream shows a perverse, homicidal tendency and all the would-be gentlemen and ladies lie stark naked in the rain, exposed for what they are: dogs. People die in the attempt to become something they are not; in the end, reality punctures that dream.

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