

Meyer Wolfshiem in *The Great Gatsby*

Introduction:

The Great Gatsby is included in the Common Core exemplars for literature, it's rare to find a high school or university in the United States that doesn't teach it, making it one of the most analyzed novels in modern American literature. Students examine and often re-examine the novel at different times throughout their lives, yet there are subtleties in the book of meaning and importance which escape the attention of many analytic reviews. Seemingly lacking is a discussion of F. Scott Fitzgerald's stereotypical depiction of his one Jewish character, Meyer Wolfshiem.

Like many Americans I first encountered *The Great Gatsby* as a student. In the late 1970s I was enrolled in a suburban high school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. At the time I realized the illustration of Meyer Wolfshiem fell into stereotypical territory, but I didn't dwell on it. Many years later as a graduate student at the University of Akron, I was enrolled in a course in Modern American Fiction in which we read the book. Now, with maturity and life experience, the characterization of Meyer Wolfshiem as ugly, insincere and menacing strikes me like a slap in the face.

These traits can be examined and addressed to get a better understanding of the story and events in American society at the time of authorship and the potential reflection of American anti-Semitism at the time of publication. An examination of the anti-Semitism in *The Great Gatsby* gives us an opportunity to analyze treatment of Jews in other iconic

works of American literature. We can also see how the depiction of Jews in books has evolved (or has it?) since *The Great Gatsby* was published nearly a century ago.

Meyer Wolfshiem: The Jew America Feared

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, we meet one Jewish character. Nick Carraway introduces us to Meyer Wolfshiem saying "a small flat-nosed Jew raised his large head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril. After a moment I discovered his tiny eyes in the half darkness" (Fitzgerald 69). As Nick is our impartial, Midwestern, and seemingly good natured narrator, we can only infer that his assessment of Wolfshiem as nothing more than an ugly Jew with nose hair, is the assessment that would be made by much of America at the time. The character is based on real life gangster, Arnold Rothstein. About Wolfshiem, Gatsby tells Nick "he's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (72), something we know to be true of Rothstein.

But the man with hair luxuriating in each of his nostrils, with the tiny eyes, is not the well groomed Arnold Rothstein known by his associates; although F. Scott Fitzgerald made it clear that Wolfshiem was based on Rothstein in a letter he wrote saying: "I selected the stuff to fit a given mood or 'hauntedness'... always starting from the small focal point that impressed me—my own meeting with Arnold Rothstein for instance" (Pauly 225). That Rothstein was a well-spoken man with impeccable manners never makes it into the book. In fact, it seems Fitzgerald went to some effort to make Wolfshiem appear crude and unrefined, when in truth the model for the character was just the opposite. Researcher, Thomas H. Pauly says "Rothstein's skills at engineering social mobility so far surpassed those of Gatsby that he would have had no need for him...Rothstein was a man of enormous

experience and sophistication... he acquired the dress and demeanor of a man about town and successfully won the confidence of the well-to-do" (225). This begs the question of why Fitzgerald would go to such lengths to create a Jewish character the public would find repugnant instead of one as refined as the man he is based on. The disparity forces us to question whether Fitzgerald had anti-Semitic tendencies, or if he created a character based on his perception of what the public would expect a Jewish character to be like. The purpose of this article is to examine whether Fitzgerald hated Jews or if he reflected the attitude toward Jews that was predominant at that time in America, or both. Specifically, I look at Fitzgerald's characterization of his Jewish character, Meyer Wolfshiem, and his relationships with Jewish people. It is my contention that Fitzgerald was simply reflecting the way many Americans felt about Jews during a time when Jewish immigration to the U.S. is at its peak.

A Reflection of American Fear

The novel is published in 1925, just one year after the historic Johnson-Reed Immigration Act which addresses the influx of immigrants. Immigration researcher, Richard Adler writes:

The most immediate impact of the new law was the restriction of eastern Europeans, particularly Jews, from entering the United States. Between 1880 and 1924, approximately two million European Jews entered the country. In the year after passage of the new immigration law, fewer than 10,000 European Jews were able to enter on an annual basis.

That the U.S. curtailed immigration, paying particular attention to regions of the world from which Jews were immigrating, tells us the sentiment in the country may have reflected the attitude that Jews were either already too plentiful or undesirable or both. Perhaps this is the disposition that motivated Fitzgerald to create a Jewish character readers would enjoy hating. Whether his portrayal of the hairy-nosed, beady eyed Wolfshiem mirrored Fitzgerald's own outlook about Jews or was the result of his observation of American sentiment toward Jews is slippery territory.

In his essay "The Maturing of F. Scott Fitzgerald," writer, Alan Margolies tackles the difficult subject of discerning Fitzgerald's disposition toward Jews. He writes:

In 1939 or 1940, Fitzgerald denied that the portrayal of Wolfshiem was anti-Semitic. Frances Kroll Ring, his secretary at the time, writes 'He said he had on occasion, been rebuked for his portrait of the 'small, fat, and disloyal' Meyer Wolfsheim[sic] in Gatsby. Scott was stung by the criticism which he considered unfair. Wolfsheim was a character whose behavior fulfilled a function in the story and had nothing to do with race or religion. He was a gangster who happened to be Jewish.' Maybe Fitzgerald was protesting a little too much, especially since Ring herself was Jewish (84-85).

That Fitzgerald employed a Jewish secretary lends to the theory that he didn't have personal misgivings about Jews (a theory he might argue), but wanted instead to create a character for an audience which may have developed an intolerance for the Jewish people.

Tom and Meyer: Linked At The Cuff?

It can be argued that his creation of the evil Tom Buchanan represents his distaste for those who seek to limit the number of immigrants into the United States. Tom asserts the idea that White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants are superior to other people telling Nick he should read *The Rise of the Coloured Empires* (27). That Tom mispronounces the author's name as Goddard instead of Stoddard, suggests Fitzgerald's disrespect for the material. He makes Tom look more foolish when he says "it's all scientific stuff; it's been proved" (27). Margolies compares the racist Tom with the ethnic Wolfshiem, saying "one aspect of Wolfshiem's function in *Gatsby* is to expose the hypocrisy of Nordicism, a theory that Fitzgerald despised: Buchanan, the Nordic, the man of privilege who comes from an old respected American family, is no less evil than Wolfshiem, the Jew" (85). Although Wolfshiem never suggests his people are superior to Nordics or others.

Fitzgerald links the two men in another way. When Nick meets Wolfshiem, the latter says "I see you're looking at my cuff buttons...finest specimens of human molars" (71). The inference is that the molars were removed from victims of Wolfshiem's violence, further cementing the idea that he is a menacing character. Later when Nick meets Tom in New York after *Gatsby's* death, Nick speculates Tom's trip to a Fifth Avenue jewelry shop is for purchasing "a pair of cuff buttons" (153); perhaps a reference to some of the ways Tom and Wolfshiem are similar. But Tom, in many ways, is an open book and easier to know than Wolfshiem. He is a large man who played football at Yale, has no cause to work, is from "old" money, and satisfies his sexual urges with more women than just his wife. In fact, he has no qualms about him and Myrtle entertaining as though they are a married couple. When the two have their neighbors, the McKees, over, Mrs. McKee tells the group she

“almost married a little kyke who’d been after me for years. I knew he was below me....if I hadn’t met Chester he’d of got me sure” (43). Mrs. McKee never apologizes for her use of the word “kyke,” or for saying the man was “below” her because he was a Jew, rather she uses the derogatory word without any signs of inhibition. This suggests Fitzgerald sees an atmosphere in which anti-Semitism is the norm.

Wolfshiem’s background is more concealed than Tom’s. We know nothing of his family or personal life; only that his connection to Gatsby gives us a little insight into how Gatsby accumulated his wealth. More difficult to explain than Wolfshiem’s lack of personal history is the name of his company, “The Swastika Holding Company” (146). As Margolies says “by 1924 and 1925, when Fitzgerald was writing and revising *Gatsby*, the swastika was relatively widespread ...as an anti-Semitic symbol” (83). This makes Fitzgerald’s use of the emblem as the name for a Jewish owned illicit business troubling. Margolies says, in the notes to his final novel, Fitzgerald makes a point of saying that he has many Jewish friends and there are many Jews he admires but questions why they have to be “so damned conceited” (86). This suggests his creation of Wolfshiem wasn’t without prejudice. But in succeeding years his attitude toward Jews and other may have softened. In 1935, ten years after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, and five years before his death from a heart attack, Fitzgerald told a friend “I hated Italians once. Jews too. Most foreigners. Mostly my fault like everything else. Now I only hate myself.” (86).

Lack of Loyalty

But in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald’s one Jewish character seems to be without much in the way of redeeming characteristics. He’s polite enough, but his rough edges seem to

override his kindhearted discourse. After Gatsby introduced him to Nick, Wolfshiem says “I have enjoyed my lunch....and I’m going to run off from you two young men before I outstay my welcome” (71). His polite exit strategy and Gatsby saying “he becomes very sentimental sometimes” (71) indicate a caring, gentle man. But Fitzgerald supplies enough ammunition to let us know that while Wolfshiem can engage in pleasant conversation, his actions do not support us feeling compassionate about him. This is best demonstrated after Gatsby’s death when Nick comes to Wolfshiem’s office to implore him to attend Gatsby’s funeral. Initially Nick is lied to by “a lovely Jewess” with “black hostile eyes” (146). She tells Nick that Wolfshiem is not in, a lie most likely commissioned by her employer. When Nick finally makes his way into Wolfshiem’s office he’s greeted by a man who while he expresses sympathy, won’t be bothered to attend the funeral of a man who considered Wolfshiem to be “his closest friend” (147). Rather than pay his respects to Gatsby at his funeral, Wolfshiem says “when a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it in any way. I keep out” (147). This unwillingness to come to Gatsby’s funeral makes Wolfshiem appear insincere about caring for Gatsby. Now that Gatsby is dead and can’t help him, he has no interest in displaying his friendship with him.

What Wolfshiem says before Nick leaves is “let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead” (147). This theory of appreciating the living rather than mourning the dead is in fact represented in Jewish philosophy and succinctly stated by Orthodox rabbi, Joseph Telushkin in an interview with National Public Radio. On the Jewish theory of an afterlife, Telushkin says “Judaism is always very ‘this worldly’ oriented. And the moment people start getting fixated on an afterlife, it can have the effect

of diverting their attention from their work in this world" (Staff. "For Rabbi, A Just God Without An Afterlife Is 'Inconceivable'"). While Wolfshiem's statement may be consistent with Judaism, his refusal to attend the funeral of a man he knows and purports to have cared for, makes him appear callous and unsympathetic. It's unclear exactly what Wolfshiem thinks could happen if he attends Gatsby's funeral, but we can infer that he worries Gatsby's death had something to do with the illicit business the two of them are involved in and he fears that whoever killed Gatsby will want to kill him as well. Of course he can't say this to Nick, as he has no intention of revealing anything to an outsider which could get him in trouble with the law.

Jew-Hater Or Typical American? Or A Cocktail of Both?

Whether Fitzgerald created the undesirable Wolfshiem to represent his own attitude toward Jews, or whether he was influenced by how the nation regarded Jews in the wake of the Johnson Reed Immigration Act of 1924 severely curtailing Jewish immigration into the United States, makes for a good debate. It's clear he recognized he had opinions about Jews and others which were likely represented in his work at the time, and upon reflection, he adjusted his views. His Jewish secretary said her boss's drinking would encourage a free tongue when it came to announcing his friendships with other Jews. Frances Kroll Ring writes: "[W]hen he was in a devilishly alcoholic state, he was quick to tell me that Sheilah [Graham] was 'part' Jewish....He knew that I was Jewish, but I was his secretary and confidante" (Margolies 87). Ring may be saying Fitzgerald was keenly aware of who amongst his friends had Jewish blood, perhaps as a poorly argued defense against the accusation that anti-Semitism fueled his characterization of Meyer Wolfshiem.

Regardless of the motive for Wolfshiem's creation, Fitzgerald chose to make him a Jew, and modeled him after Arnold Rothstein, only without the sophistication and glamour surrounding Rothstein. Instead he created a character he thought American readers would recognize, a gruff, nose haired, fat, disloyal man who is more interested in personal wealth than in personal friendships. It is my contention that America so greatly feared Jewish influx into society, the government would enact legislation for the purpose of not allowing more Jews into the country. Characterizing his Jew as the repugnant Wolfshiem, Fitzgerald played to a readership eager to drink the anti-Jew koolaid. In this way Fitzgerald capitalized on an idea that makes his fictional character far more memorable than the real life person he is based on, perpetuating a stereotype that readers and now film audiences continue to learn about nearly ninety years after initial publication of *The Great Gatsby*. F. Scott Fitzgerald illustrates how many people with money and privilege like Tom and Mrs. McKee had a blatantly accepted dislike of Jews. But less obvious anti-Semitism is in the subtext of Wolfshiem's character, perhaps revealing Fitzgerald's own distrust of Jews or maybe revealing how America as a whole felt about Jews at that time. The examination of Wolfshiem and Mrs. McKee's unchallenged comments give us some insight into what was considered an acceptable view of Jews and how such an attitude may have led to legislation limiting the number of Jews allowed to enter the U.S. after 1924, impacting the overwhelmingly large number of Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust.

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Teaching Tips/Lesson Plan

Ask students to root out other under-the-radar messages in the book. For example on page 18 Daisy introduces Nick to Jordan Baker. Nick recalls a “critical, unpleasant story” about the famed female athlete, but never lets on what that story is. Baker and Nick have romance, but one he doesn’t take very seriously. Why is that? What story could have circulated about a female athlete at that time? Tom says “they oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way” (18). Why not? What would be problematic about an adult female athlete touring the country?

On page 37 Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose, yet little more attention is paid to this in the book. Mr. McKee and Nick do nothing to help Myrtle or rebuke Tom. Instead the two of them leave and discuss having lunch as if nothing had happened. Are we to believe the abuse that took place is common or did these men not want to get involved? What does it say about the character of the two men? About Tom? About women? After an elevator ride away from the scene of the abuse Nick says “I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands” (38). Whose bed? Who was in his underwear? Did the two men have a romantic encounter?

Another outsider is the Greek restaurant owner, Michaelis. It’s Michaelis who is the primary witness to Myrtle’s death, yet this young immigrant plays no other real role in the lives of the Wilsons, despite being their neighbor for four years. Was Fitzgerald marginalizing immigrants like Michaelis and Wolfshiem, or was he reflecting the American attitude toward foreign born citizens at that time?

On page 69 Fitzgerald writes “a limousine passed us driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.” Fitzgerald calls the female a “girl,” and the males: “bucks.” Is this racism or simply a variation on adjectives to describe the trio. He makes a point of telling us the chauffeur is white and the occupants are black. Why is that important in the story?