“THE LAST AND GREATEST OF ALL HUMAN DREAMS”: THE INFLUENCE OF JESSIE WESTON’S FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE ON THE GREAT GATSBY

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“THE LAST AND GREATEST OF ALL HUMAN DREAMS”: THE INFLUENCE OF JESSIE WESTON’S FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE ON THE GREAT GATSBY

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Abstract

of

“THE LAST AND GREATEST OF ALL HUMAN DREAMS”: THE INFLUENCE OF JESSIE WESTON’S FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE ON THE GREAT GATSBY

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Andrea Lynn Lagomarsino

Many critics have noted the grail quest motif in The Great Gatsby, arguing that Fitzgerald portrays Jay Gatsby as a quester who symbolically seeks the grail in his pursuit of Daisy Buchanan. However, as Fitzgerald’s understanding of the grail quest was likely influenced by Jessie Weston’s From Ritual to Romance, the reading of Gatsby as quester and Daisy as grail is problematic. According to Weston, the grail was not a material object, nor was the quester’s task simply to obtain a tangible reward; instead, she believes that grail legend is a reinvention of ancient fertility cult rituals in which the Fisher King plays the role of the nature god, the quester is the counterpart of the cult initiates who worshipped the god, and the grail symbolizes the ultimate apotheosis of the initiate: gnosis of physical and spiritual life. Using From Ritual to Romance as a basis for analysis, this thesis offers a close reading of The Great Gatsby in which Nick Carraway plays the part of the quester and Gatsby fulfills the role of the Fisher King. This analysis is based on abundant evidence suggesting a close link between Gatsby and Adonis, the god Weston believes to be the archetype of the Fisher King, and between Nick and the nature cult initiates who sought transcendence through the god.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, one of our culture’s most celebrated classic tales, is rich in American mythology; its themes of rags to riches, the self-made man, and the journey west establish the novel as a paradigm of American folklore. Comparing *Gatsby* to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Laura Barrett identifies these two cultural icons as integral to the “American fairy tale,” stating that “what brings Dorothy Gale and Nick Carraway to their enchanted places is a quest for the American dream” (153). It is this quest that places *The Great Gatsby* at the core of American mythology.

But American mythology does not exist in isolation. Joseph Campbell tells us that myths function on two levels: sociologically, linking people to their specific time and culture, and evolutionarily, connecting humans to nature and to the natural world of which we are all a part. Myths are not just products of their own time and culture but also possess archetypal patterns that evoke the folklore of divergent cultures in different eras. Campbell’s life work uncovered what he called timeless themes, stories that repeated each other throughout Christianity, Hinduism, Iroquois folklore, and Arthurian legend, among other disparate cultural and religious myths. To Campbell, this repetition indicated that myths are metaphors for the powers that drive us, and he concluded that “the same powers that animate our life animate the life of the world” (28). American literature is no exception, and beneath the overtones of American mythology in *The Great Gatsby* lie allusions to a more ancient and widespread lore. Critics have pointed to various traces of classical and religious mythology that exist in the novel: Thomas
Dilworth likens Gatsby to Jesus and Gatsby’s death to the crucifixion; Briggs Ward recognizes elements of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* throughout the novel; Michael Pottorf even links Myrtle’s little dog, who stares with blind eyes at the venalities of Tom and Myrtle’s party, to the sightless seer of tragedy, Tiresias.

More commonly, critics have examined another intriguing mythological allusion in *The Great Gatsby*: the grail quest. Owing heavily to Nick’s claim that Gatsby “had committed himself to the following of a grail,” most critics have concluded that Gatsby becomes an anti-hero who symbolically capsizes all romantic and honorable notions of a quest by pursuing wealth as a means to win back Daisy (149). In *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Essay*, Edwin Moseley analyzes the novel as an “initiation and quest for the grail,” arguing that *The Great Gatsby* is “the initiation story of Nick Carraway and the story of Jay Gatsby’s misdirected quest” (22). Robert Emmitt, in his essay “Love, Death, and Resurrection in *The Great Gatsby*,” argues that “Gatsby’s romantic quest, with its search for a grail and its parodic connotations of the Christian sacrifice, is a parable of the fate of idolatry, and a commentary on its particular American manifestations” (283). James Ellis, in “The Shadow-Figure behind *The Great Gatsby*: James, Duke of Monmouth,” claims that Gatsby undertakes a power-hungry and illusory quest for greatness, which “waits upon his winning Daisy Fay, the golden girl who symbolizes the incarnation of all the powers of his imagination” (174). Similarly, in their article “Sangria in the Sangreal: *The Great Gatsby* as Grail Quest,” D.G. Kehl and Allene Cooper characterize Gatsby as a quester and conclude that the grail is “personified by Daisy Buchanan” (203).
Indeed *The Great Gatsby* is rife with symbols of a quest; however, each of the aforementioned arguments presupposes that the novel’s quest motif is ironic, even “parodic.” It seems that none of these critics has considered that perhaps the quest motif has a much more serious, profound, and primeval significance than an ironic comment on contemporary American values.

I would like to suggest that the grail quest motif in *The Great Gatsby* has a source different from that which any other critic has yet pointed out. This likely source opens up a new realm of possibility for the significance of the quest in the novel, and allows us to view Gatsby and Nick not as, respectively, amoral and superficial anti-heroes, but as archetypal characters in an ancient ritualistic drama. This source is Jessie L. Weston’s study of the origins of the grail quest, *From Ritual to Romance*. The evidence and implications of Weston’s influence on Fitzgerald reveal a fascinating perspective on the grail quest theme in *The Great Gatsby*.

The likelihood of Fitzgerald’s interest in *From Ritual to Romance* is initially illuminated by his relationship with T.S. Eliot. In October of 1925, Fitzgerald sent a copy of his novel to Eliot with the following inscription:

For T.S. Eliot

Greatest of living poets

From his enthusiastic worshipper

F. Scott Fitzgerald (Bruccoli 128)

The following February, he commented to Maxwell Perkins that “T.S. Eliot for whom you know my profound admiration – I think he’s the greatest living poet in any language
– wrote me he’d read *Gatsby* three times + thought it was the 1st step forward American fiction had taken since Henry James” (137).

Eliot’s influence on Fitzgerald surpassed general awe and inspiration; in fact, there are many indications that *The Great Gatsby* is in part an emulation of *The Waste Land*. In his article “Rediscovering Fitzgerald,” Critic Jeffrey Hart points out that “Fitzgerald studied *The Waste Land* while he was working on *Gatsby*…the book both salutes Eliot and answers him” (208). Careful readings of each text indeed reveal numerous similarities between *The Waste Land* and *The Great Gatsby*. Perhaps the most notable parallel is the presence of the “valley of ashes …the waste land” in *Gatsby*, home of George and Myrtle Wilson and setting of Myrtle’s death (Fitzgerald 23, 24). Nick Carraway describes this waste land as a “fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (23). The arid sterility and false sense of fertility conveyed by this landscape mirror Eliot’s “stony rubbish … where the sun beats,/ The dead tree gives no shelter” (Eliot 20, 22-23). Just as the “rock and no water and the sandy road…mountains of rock with no water” can sustain neither life nor hope in *The Waste Land*, so do the “gray land and the spasms of bleak dust” in Fitzgerald’s valley of ashes symbolize the vapid and ill-fated existence of the Wilsons (Eliot 332, 334, Fitzgerald 23).

Additionally, there are many intriguing echoes of *The Waste Land* in the water imagery that pervades *The Great Gatsby*. The “small, foul river” in the valley of ashes
seems to be a counterpart of *The Waste Land*’s “dull canal” (Fitzgerald 24, Eliot 189). The summer parties that Gatsby throws on the shores of the Long Island Sound are littered with “fruit rinds and discarded favors and crushed flowers” and other “ravages of the night before”; these “ravages” are reminiscent of the “empty bottles…silk handkerchiefs… [and] cigarettes ends” along the Thames that serve as a “testimony of summer nights” in the raw modern age of *The Waste Land* (Fitzgerald 109, 39, Eliot 177-179). Nick’s lamenting Gatsby’s death by the waters of Long Island Sound reminds us of Eliot’s narrator who “by the waters of Leman … sat down and wept” (Eliot 182).

Imagery of water and color even render a resemblance between Fitzgerald’s Daisy and Eliot’s hyacinth girl. When Daisy meets Gatsby at Nick’s house, she appears “under the dripping bare lilac trees … a damp streak of hair lay like a dash of blue paint across her cheek, and her hand was wet with glistening drops” (Fitzgerald 85). Similarly, Eliot’s hyacinth girl returns “late, from the Hyacinth garden,” her “arms full, and [her] hair wet” (Eliot 37, 38).

Considering Fitzgerald’s thorough knowledge of and reverence for *The Waste Land*, it is extremely likely that he was familiar with the book to which Eliot was outspokenly and “deeply… indebted” as a source for his great poem, the inspiration of “not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of [*The Waste Land*]”: Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (21). Fitzgerald’s familiarity with this work has also been suggested by Robert Emmitt, who claims that “it seems probable that Fitzgerald was lead to Frazer and Weston by Eliot’s introductory footnote in *The Waste Land*, where the works of both are highly praised as sources of inspiration.” Emmitt also
points to “the comprehensive explanatory power of the myth themes [in *Gatsby*] and their ability to unify diverse strains of *Gatsby* criticism” as evidence that Weston’s work inspired Fitzgerald (274).

A lifelong scholar of grail texts, Jessie Weston wrote *From Ritual to Romance* in 1919 as a culmination of her studies not only of grail legend, but of classical and medieval myth, literature, and scholarship ranging from the earliest existing literary text, the *Rig-Veda*, to Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. From her enormous breadth and depth of research, Weston drew the conclusion that grail legend is rooted neither in Christianity nor British folklore, but in the secret rituals of pre-Christian fertility cults.

The symbolism that Eliot adopted from Weston’s book includes not only that of the grail quest, but of these fertility rituals as well. The grail quest is a central motif that both opens and closes the poem; Eliot’s narrator enters the waste land in the poem’s second stanza – “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” – and is left there at the poem’s conclusion: “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plains behind me. / Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (19-20, 423-425). Also critical to the poem is the myth of the fertility cult; in the introduction to his notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot says of *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*, “anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognise in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies” (Eliot 21). Imagery and themes of fertility, regeneration, and the quest are similarly important in Fitzgerald’s novel.

If we consider Fitzgerald’s admiration of *The Waste Land* and his likely familiarity with Weston’s work on the true character of the grail quest – that the source of
the quest was not the possession of a material object but, like the rites of ancient fertility
cults, an apotheosis in which the quester gains true knowledge of physical and spiritual
life – it seems superficial and erroneous to claim that Daisy is a personification of the
grail and that Gatsby plays the role of the quester. As to Nick’s assertion that “Gatsby
had committed himself to the following of a grail,” I would argue that Fitzgerald likely
intended to draw attention to the grail quest motif in the novel, but not in the way that
most critics have interpreted it (Fitzgerald 149). While there is a dearth of evidence to
support the idea that Gatsby is the quester and Daisy is the grail, abundant evidence exists
to prove an alternative theory: The Great Gatsby is the story of a quest; not, however, the
romantic version of the grail quest associated with King Arthur and Lancelot and the
search for a holy relic, nor the quest of Gatsby as he seeks material wealth in pursuit of
Daisy, but one of a very different nature.

To elucidate what exactly this quest is, we must first turn to From Ritual to
Romance and examine the origin and purpose of the quest as Weston describes it. In
doing so, we will discover that the grail was not simply an object, but a symbol of life
and the gnosis of mortality and divinity. This will lead to the conclusion that Fitzgerald’s
quest motif does not portray Gatsby as the quester and Daisy as the grail; instead, Nick
Carraway is a quester seeking knowledge of physical and spiritual life, and Gatsby fulfills
the role of the maimed Fisher King who inadvertently leads Nick to his apotheosis.

The following chapters will first summarize Weston’s argument, then explicate
the numerous ways in which The Great Gatsby reflects her explanation of the grail quest.
I will provide thorough evidence for my claim that while Gatsby may have “committed
himself to the following of *a* grail,” he is not in fact following *the* grail (149, emphasis added). Instead, it is Nick who seeks *the* grail, and his quest for initiation into the mysteries of physical and spiritual life echoes the rituals of the mystic life cults in which the grail quest is rooted.
Chapter 2

FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE: THE ORIGINS OF THE GRAIL QUEST

Before exploring the ways in which The Great Gatsby mirrors the elements of the grail quest presented in From Ritual to Romance, it is necessary to provide a summary of Weston’s argument.

During her thirty years of studying grail texts, Weston garnered evidence contradicting the common belief that the myth’s origins existed either in Christianity or British folklore. She was disconcerted by the fact that while many elements of grail legend could be traced to Christian roots, certain features became unavoidably paradoxical. For example, “the theory of Christian origin breaks down when faced with the awkward fact that there is no Christian legend concerning Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail. Neither in Legendary, nor in Art, is there any trace of the story; it has no existence outside the grail literature” (2). Furthermore, she claims, evidence of the legend’s Celtic roots are undermined by the fact that “while parallels can be found for this or that feature of the legend, such parallels are isolated in character and involve the breaking up of the tale into a composite of mutually independent themes. A prototype, containing the main features of the Grail story … does not, so far as we know, exist” (3). Nevertheless, the validity that several aspects of the legend obviously originate in Christianity and Celtic lore cannot be disputed.

After studying James Frazer’s The Golden Bough, Weston began to formulate an explanation of the grail myth’s origins that could reconcile these incongruities. Intriguing similarities between the grail stories and the descriptions of the nature cults
that Frazer’s book illuminates led her to believe that grail legend may be a record of a life ritual commonly practiced in pre-Christian times and covertly observed in the centuries following the spread of Christianity. After further research, Weston discovered that we can now prove by printed texts the parallels existing between each and every feature of the Grail story and the recorded symbolism of the Mystery cults. Further, we can show that between these Mystery cults and Christianity there existed at one time a close and intimate union, such a union as of itself involved the practical assimilation of the central rite. (5)

The evolution of the grail myth from this ancient genesis through Christianity and eventually into medieval lore would allow the paradoxical variations of the story to finally cohere in a reasonable explanation of origin. Weston explains the “assimilation of the central rite” towards the end of her book, and therefore I will summarize this explanation after providing more necessary background information.

As Weston supports her theory, she defines the grail legend as being represented by three different story cycles, each featuring a different hero: Perceval, Gawain, or Galahad. The seminal works that she cites include the Diû Crône, Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval, the prose Perceval, Sone de Nansai, Perlesvaus, and the Queste.

Weston’s primary objective is to investigate “the true nature and character of the mysterious object we know as the Grail”; this, she claims, can be illuminated by examining the task of the grail quester and its expected results, which vary depending on the hero (2). In this process, certain definitive questions arise: Does the hero understand his task upon setting out on the quest? If not, does he eventually inquire about this task?
Is the result of the quest beneficial to the hero, the Grail King (sometimes referred to as the Fisher King), or the king’s wasted lands?

The majority of existing grail texts feature Perceval as the hero, and though these versions differ greatly in detail, the hero’s task remains the same throughout: to heal the Fisher King from a debilitating illness or injury, regenerating the king’s lands as a result. In all versions of the Perceval form, the hero will achieve his task by asking a crucial question: what is the grail, or in some cases, who does the grail serve? Typically, the quester initially fails to ask this important question, and the king’s lands become sterile and desolate as a result. In some versions, the hero never asks the question, so both the king and his lands perish; in the majority of the Perceval stories, however, the question is finally asked, the king’s health and vitality are restored, and the hero effectively “free[s] the waters,” bringing life back to the wasted land (14).

In certain versions of the Gawain legend, the hero does not know his task when he sets out, and he fails to make inquiries about it; however, in other versions, Gawain knows that he must break the spell that has been cast on the Grail King. In both cases, as in the Perceval legend, the result of the quest is to restore the wasted land to fruitfulness.

Finally, in the Galahad form, there is no waste land; therefore, reifying the kingdom plays no part in the quester’s task. Instead, the advantages are personal and spiritual, yet the hero incidentally heals the Fisher King’s father on his journey.

Despite the variations in the three different cycles, Weston provides the following synthesis: “The aim of the Grail Quest is two-fold; it is to benefit (a) the King, (b) the land. The first of these two is the more important, as it is the infirmity of the King which
entails misfortune on his land, the condition of the one reacts, for good or ill, upon the other; how, or why, we are left to discover for ourselves” (21).

In most versions of the legend, the exact affliction of the king is quite mysterious. However, Weston discovered in the *Sone de Nansai* an explanation that she claims applies to all versions in which the king suffers. In this romance, the Fisher King slays the Pagan King of Norway but subsequently falls in love with his daughter, the pagan princess. He baptizes her, though she is not a true believer, then marries her, provoking God’s wrath. As punishment for his blasphemy, “‘His loins are stricken by this bane / From which he suffers lasting pain’” (22). But that is not the only consequence; the Fisher King’s infirmity not only emasculates him, but renders his lands infertile as a result:

“Lorgres his land was from this day
Called by all, and truth to say,
Well should Lorgres be named with tears,
With bitter weeping, grief and fears.
For here no fertile seed is sown,
Neither peas nor grain are grown,
Never a child of man is born,
Mateless maidens sadly mourn,
On the trees no leaf is seen
Nor are the meadows growing green,
Birds build no nests, no song is sung,
And hapless beasts shall bear no young, 
So is it while the sinful king
Shall evil on his people bring.
For Jesus Christ does punish well
The land wherein the wicked dwell.” (22-23)

According to Weston, the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the illness, injury, or death of the king robs him of his virility and strips his lands of their reproductive abilities. Therefore, the task of the hero is ultimately to heal the king and in so doing, to restore his lands to vitality. Furthermore, she asserts that this theme can be traced to earlier literature.

The Rig Veda, or The Thousand and One Hymns, is one of the earliest existing literary texts. Written in ancient India and sacred to Hindus, it is a collection of hymns and praises of the mainly agrarian Aryan population who depended on warmth, sunshine and water for the fertility of their lands. Water being perhaps the most important natural element, the majority of the hymns are dedicated to Indra, the god responsible for the rains. More significantly, Indra is praised in the Rig Veda for having “freed the waters”; when the evil giant Vritra imprisoned the seven rivers of India and thus imposed drought and starvation on the people, Indra slew him, freeing the rivers from their captivity and restoring the lands back to life and fertility. Weston notes that Indra’s accomplishment is the same for which Perceval and Gawain are exalted in grail legend.

A similar motif is found in yet another ancient Hindu myth, the story of Richyaçringa, a young Brahmin brought up by his father in the wilderness. When a
drought falls upon a neighboring kingdom, its ruler believes that as long as Richyaçringa remains chaste, the drought and famine will continue. When Richyaçringa’s father is away, the king sends a beautiful young woman in a boat to seduce the innocent hermit. Richyaçringa forgets his religious duties and falls prey to the seductress. Eventually he is lured back to her kingdom, where he marries the king’s daughter, and as a result the drought immediately subsides. Weston draws a parallel between the circumstances of Richyaçringa and Perceval, who was also raised in an isolated woodland far away from other humans. Perceval too is tempted by a “fiend, in the form of a fair maiden, who comes to him by water in a vessel hung with black silk, and with great riches on board;” later he undertakes the quest to alleviate the king’s wasted lands from a disastrous drought (32).

Like the ancient Aryans who worshipped Indra, most nature cults personified the seasons, weather patterns, vegetation, and other natural elements as divine figures that resembled humans and their experiences. These deities symbolized the natural processes of the earth, and therefore were believed to progress from birth to death in the course of a year. The primary examples that Weston cites are the Phoenician-Greek god Adonis and his predecessor from the Sumerian-Babylonian civilization, Tammuz. Tammuz represented the spirit of vegetation, whose annual disappearance into the underworld brought death and sadness to the land until he returned again in the spring, restoring his reproductive energies to earth. Furthermore, Tammuz was believed to be “‘the faithful son of the fresh waters which come from the earth.’” also representing the life-giving waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (38). Therefore there was tremendous cause for
celebration among the nature cults when Tammuz returned to earth each spring: vegetation bloomed, animals gave birth, and the rivers flooded the dry plains.

The cult of Adonis is considered an exact counterpart of the cult of Tammuz, with one significant difference: while there is plentiful evidence of the celebrations marking Adonis’s resurrection, there is no liturgical record of the celebration among the worshippers of Tammuz. However, since the lamentations for his disappearance are thoroughly recorded, as are references to the effects of his return, scholars believe that resurrection ceremonies for Tammuz were intentionally cloaked in mystery. In his study *Tammuz and Ishtar*, Stephen Langden concludes that “‘the actual mysteries may have been performed in a secret chamber, and consequently the scenes were forbidden in art. This would account for the surprising dearth of archaeological evidence concerning a cult upon which the very life of mankind was supposed to depend’” (Weston 41).

There is much more evidence to elucidate the rituals of the cult of Adonis. One well-known tale of the god recounts how Adonis was mortally wounded in the thigh by a wild boar. After his death, his lover Aphrodite convinced Zeus to allow Adonis to return to earth for a portion of the year, thus dividing his time between Aphrodite and Persephone. Therefore, in the Phoenician-Greek culture, Adonis became the vegetation god whose death was lamented in autumn and whose rebirth was celebrated in spring. Interestingly, Weston points out, scholars generally agree that Adonis’s thigh wound is euphemistic for an emasculating injury that symbolizes earth’s infertility, with which his death is associated. The story of Adonis, divine youth beloved by a goddess, whose loss of reproductive abilities came to represent the degeneration of earth in autumn and
winter, bears a striking resemblance to the Fisher King’s loss of fecundity, and that of his lands, as punishment for his love of a pagan princess.

Several fascinating parallels between the rituals of the cult of Adonis and elements of the grail legend will serve as a basis for my analysis of the quest in *The Great Gatsby*. Striking resemblances arise from the celebrations and lamentations of the birth and death of Adonis. In Greece and Palestine, the return of earth’s reproductive energies via Adonis was celebrated with several days of feasting in the springtime; the people of Cyprus observed rites for the god’s death, which fell on September 23. Ritualistic celebrations of his birth or death, depending on the region, included casting an effigy of the god, or sometimes a papyrus head, into the ocean. Women played an important role in these rituals; commonly, during his death rites, “it is the women who weep for him and accompany him to his tomb. They sob wildly all night long”; furthermore, women were expected to cut off their hair in mourning for the god (47).

In grail legend, Weston claims, the wounded Fisher King corresponds with the effigy of Adonis, their injuries being of the same nature, and their resurrection depended upon for the regeneration of their lands. Furthermore, several versions of the Perceval and Gawain myths contain a weeping woman, or several weeping women, in the grail castle: in the prose *Lancelot*, it is stated that twelve maidens “sob wildly, all night long” (49). Equally interesting, in the *Perlesvaus* we find the “curious detail of a maiden who has lost her hair a result of the hero’s failure to ask the question, and the consequent sickness of the Fisher King” (51). Finally, it is important to note that the grail castle is always situated next to a body of water, either sea or river; we must remember that an
important feature of the Adonis rituals is the water to which celebrants committed the
effigy or paper head of the god.

Weston continues to trace the rites of nature cults and their celebrations of a
vegetation deity throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe, including Britain, where the Celts
and the literary evidence of grail legend originate. Throughout all of these cultures, she
insists, there is a fundamental worship of a god or king whose well being is inextricably
linked to the fertility of the land. Therefore, she asserts,

there is no longer any shadow of a doubt that in the Grail King we have a
romantic literary version of that strange mysterious figure whose presence hovers
in the shadowy background of the history of our Aryan race; the figure of a divine
or semi-divine ruler, at once god and king, upon whose life, and unimpaired
vitality, the existence of his land and people directly depends. (62)

As she continues her argument, Weston links the important symbols in grail
legend to symbols of equal significance in various nature cults. The sacred objects
presented in the grail castle include the lance, or spear, and the cup, or chalice, which
Weston interprets as fertility symbols commonly associated with life cults of Egyptian,
Chinese, Byzantine, and Celtic heritage. The grail knights and their ceremonies may
have developed from the ancient sword-dances commonly practiced by warriors of the
Mouretes of ancient India (as narrated in the *Rig Veda*) and the Kouretes and Korybanes
of ancient Greece.

Perhaps one of the most important figures in grail legend is the Fisher King, and
Weston attributes the symbolism of this title to a widespread tradition found in Hinduism,
Buddhism, Judaism, and the mystery cults of the Balkan region, as well as Christianity and Celtic folklore. In *Joseph of Arimathea*, Robert de Borron accounts for the title of the Fisher King by explaining how, as Joseph led his companions on their wanderings through the wilderness, certain of his company fell into sin. When God commanded Joseph’s brother-in-law Brons to catch a fish and provide a mystic meal, they discovered that the unworthy could not partake in the feast, and consequently the sinners were separated from the holy men. Brons, thereafter known as the Rich Fisher, later appears in Borron’s *Perceval* romance as the king, thus explaining that sovereign’s identity as a fisher. This seems to be the first introduction of the fish in grail legend; however, the fish as a symbol can be traced back thousands of years to numerous cultures and religions. In Christianity, for example, the fish is metonymical for the savior. Jewish tradition prophesies that at the end of the world, the great fish Leviathon will be caught, his flesh divided among the faithful. In the Hindu and Buddhist religions, the fish is widely regarded as a life source: the first avatar of Vishnu the Creator is the fish; in the Mahayana scriptures, Buddha is referred to as a fisherman “who draws fish from the ocean of Samsara to the light of Salvation” (126). The fish is often employed in funeral rites in India and China, where according to *The Open Court*, “‘the Fish was sacred to those Deities who were supposed to lead men back from the shadows of death to life’” (Weston 127). Furthermore, in the ancient Sumerian lamentation for the death of Tammuz, the god is often referred to as “Divine Lamgar, Lord of the Net,” and there was a fish known to the Semites as Adonis; however, as Weston points out, this title generally signifies “lord” and therefore may not provide any specific allusion (128). In the mystery
culpts, we find further significance embedded in the fish symbol: Weston states that “upon a tablet dedicated to the Phrygian *Magna Mater* we find Fish and Cup; and Dölger, speaking of a votive tablet discovered in the Balkans, says, ‘Here the fish always stands out very clearly as the holy food of a Mystery Cult’” (129). Weston continues with several other examples of the fish as a symbol of human energy, wisdom, and salvation, concluding that the fish and fisher are universally considered “life symbols of immemorial antiquity,” and therefore the Fisher King is “not merely a deeply symbolic figure, but the essential centre of the whole cult … If the Grail story be based upon a Life ritual the character of the Fisher King is of the very essence of the tale, and his title, so far from being meaningless, expresses … the intention and object of the perplexing whole” (135-136).

Having elucidated the origins of these various symbols and motifs, Weston returns to her discussion of the “central rite” that explains the mystery of the grail. It is generally recognized, she tells us, that nature cult rituals consisted of two separate rites: the “exoteric,” or public celebrations observed openly by all members of the cult, in which feasting and other pleasures were enjoyed for purely physical or material purposes, and the “esoteric,” or mystery rites observed by only a select few, in which the benefits were individual, spiritual, and often “aimed at … the attainment of a conscious, ecstatic union with the god” (140). These rituals, Weston claims, lie at the very heart of grail legend, for the secret of the grail is the transubstantiation of the ancient exoteric and esoteric rites; it is “a double initiation into the source of the lower and higher spheres of Life,” the lower sphere being knowledge of human life upon earth, the higher sphere
being an understanding of the spiritual forces of life (159). As the ancient initiates sought
a union with the gods of the nature cults, who transcended earthly existence by bringing
the divine gifts of water and vegetation to an ailing land, the grail quester seeks the
ability to heal the king – who, like the fertility gods, embodies humanity and its struggles
– thus achieving gnosis of human life; in doing so, he simultaneously endeavors to
regenerate the land, allegorically discovering divine powers by personifying nature.

To explain how the nature cults would have impacted the romances narrated
centuries later in France and England, Weston remarks that “the evidence, not merely of
the existence of Mysteries, but of their widespread popularity, is overwhelming” (142).
The worship of a nature god, be it Tammuz, Attis or Adonis, the celebration of his birth
and death and the rites connected to it, were observed throughout Asia Minor as well as
in ancient Greece and Rome; pre- and post-Christian Gnostic sects also participated in
Attis worship. Considering that Christianity was born in this very region before
spreading throughout Europe, it is extremely likely that “the Mystic Feast of the Nature
cults really had, and that at a very early date, been brought into touch with the Sacrament
of the Eucharist” (161). Furthermore, “dedications to Melkart and Astarte have been
found at Corbridge near Newcastle” substantiating the influence of the nature cults in the
farthest reaching corners of Europe (17).

According to Weston, Robert de Borron was an important link in the evolution of
pre-Christian mystery into Christianity and folklore:

Borron was certainly aware of the real character of his material; he knew the Grail
as Christianized Mystery, and, while following the romance development,
handled the theme on distinctively religious lines, preserving the Mystery element in its three-fold development, and equating the Vessel of the Mystic Feast with the Christian Eucharist. From what we know of the material it seems certain that the equation was already established, and that Borron was simply stating in terms of romance what was already shown to him in terms of Mystery. (161)

Thus the progression of the mystery from ancient ritual to medieval romance was complete.

It is now time to turn to *The Great Gatsby* and analyze the ways in which Gatsby and Nick are presented as the Fisher King and quester of grail legend, ultimately conveying the symbolism of the mystic life cults. Additionally, we will see how Daisy, Jordan, and Tom, as well as the novel’s setting and plot, further support this theory.
Chapter 3

GATSBY AS THE FISHER KING

Weston calls the Fisher King “the very essence of the tale,” and likewise the great Jay Gatsby is the essence of Fitzgerald’s novel (136). In fact, most of Weston’s final comments on the Fisher King’s significance in grail legend, cited in the previous chapter, quite accurately resemble Gatsby’s role in the novel. If the Fisher King is the “essential centre” of grail legend, then Gatsby is the essential center of the eponymous novel: his friendship changes the course of Nick’s experience in New York, therefore altering Nick’s life; his relationship with Daisy ultimately causes Myrtle’s death as well as his own. Gatsby’s failed pursuit of Daisy even reunites her with Tom in the end; along with Myrtle’s death, the idea that Gatsby may usurp him forces Tom to cling to Daisy, “retreat[ing] back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together” (179). Furthermore, it is because of Gatsby that Nick attains a greater understanding of human life and its spiritual forces. Nick initially introduces Gatsby as the man whose experience “closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men,” the man who exposed Nick to “riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” (2). As I will more thoroughly discuss in the following chapter, Gatsby is responsible for Nick’s initiation to the driving forces of humanity; for now the essential point is that like the Fisher King, Gatsby, too, is “the intention and object of the perplexing whole” (Weston 136).

All of the relationships portrayed in the novel either center on Jay Gatsby (to use Weston’s words, he becomes the “intention and object” of much energy and emotion), or
they are commenced or extinguished by an affiliation with him. Although Nick meets Jordan at the Buchanans’ house, she is only an acquaintance at the time, as evidenced by Nick’s formal reference to her as “Miss Baker” throughout the first chapter (20). It is when they bump into each other at Gatsby’s party that she suddenly becomes “Jordan”; the common association with Gatsby propels their relationship forward, and from that point on he functions as an axis to the movement of their affair (43). Nick and Jordan are continually drawn into Gatsby’s world: their relationship paves the way for Gatsby’s reunion with Daisy, and later they are critically involved in Gatsby’s and Daisy’s plan to expose their affair to Tom, intentionally placed as a buffer for the “rather harrowing scene that Gatsby had outlined in his garden” (114). When Gatsby’s dream falls into oblivion, so does the relationship between Nick and Jordan. After Myrtle’s death, Nick decides that he has “had enough of all of them for one day – and suddenly that included Jordan, too” (142). Furthermore, the connection between Nick and Daisy is cemented by their mutual association with Gatsby: although they are cousins, most of their meetings throughout the novel are instigated by Gatsby. It is Gatsby’s death that exposes Daisy’s vapidity to Nick; he realizes that she is “artificial,” a “careless” person who “smashed up things and people,” part of “a rotten crowd,” too selfish to send “a message or a flower” after Gatsby’s death (151, 179, 154, 174). As a fulcrum point for the tottering relationships that pervade the novel, Gatsby matches Weston’s characterization of the Fisher King in grail legend as “the heart and centre of the whole mystery” (136).

Weston describes the Fisher King not only as closely connected to his land, but as “standing between his people and the land, and the unseen forces which control their
destiny” (136). The same can be said of Gatsby, who as Nick tells us early in the novel is “like one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (Fitzgerald 2). His relationship with the land is repeatedly reinforced, from Nick’s early speculations of his mysterious neighbor to his more profound insights into Gatsby’s character. Early in the novel, Nick attributes Gatsby’s downfall to “what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams” (2). Gatsby’s relationship with the land is so fundamental that his mistakes are “foul dust,” his unreasonable hopes like wild animals that finally tear him apart. At the end of the novel, Nick sits on Gatsby’s beach, pondering the “fresh, green breast of the new world” and “its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house,” as if the earth yields up and sacrifices its very best for him (180). The green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, one of Gatsby’s most “enchanted objects,” becomes a symbol of that “fresh, green breast” over which Gatsby briefly reigns (93). “Gatsby believed in the green light,” Nick tells us, drawing an important parallel between Gatsby – trembling with awe, reaching across the water toward Daisy’s green light at the novel’s opening – and the image of the Dutch sailor at the novel’s end who was “compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (180). Like those sailors, Gatsby possesses “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life … an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness” (2). This association between the green light and the green breast of the new world, between Gatsby and the early explorers of the virgin terrain that became Long Island, further asserts the link between Gatsby and the land.
Gatsby is repeatedly characterized by his connection to the earth and sky throughout the novel. When Nick initially describes Gatsby’s mansion, he notes that “more than forty acres of lawn and garden” surround it, and the “partial view of my neighbor’s lawn” is one of the primary features of his own inferior house that stands out to him (5). Nick’s first glimpse of Gatsby occurs after he has returned from dinner with the Buchanans; as Nick enters his dark house, he notices Gatsby “across the moonlight” and is struck by “the secure position of his feet upon the lawn.” Nick perceives that Gatsby has “come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens,” which immediately enforces Gatsby’s inextricable relationship with the earth below him and the sky above (20). Furthermore, celestial and vegetation imagery pervades Gatsby’s parties, where “in his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and stars”; later Nick reflects that Gatsby “dispensed starlight to casual moths” (39, 78). When Nick first attends a party, he notices the colored lights that “make a Christmas tree of Gatsby’s enormous garden,” and a “premature moon” that hovers above the bacchanal (40, 43). Later in the evening “the moon had risen higher,” and as Nick leaves he notices “a wafer of a moon … shining over Gatsby’s house … surviving the laughter and the sound of his still glowing garden” (47, 55).

Moonlight is especially associated with Gatsby’s person and often illuminates his longing for Daisy. In two parallel scenes, Gatsby holds a quiet vigil for Daisy in the moonlight, desperately yearning for her even though she is far beyond his reach. Early in the novel, when Nick observes Gatsby “across the moonlight,” he tells us that Gatsby
“stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling.” Gatsby of course is reaching for the “single green light” of Daisy’s dock (20-21). Months later, after the accident that kills Myrtle, Gatsby stands in the dark outside of Daisy’s house, closer to her proximally but perhaps even farther away from his dream of her. Like months before, when he observed Gatsby’s reverence for the green light, Nick again perceives “the sacredness of his vigil” as Gatsby “stand[s] there in the moonlight – watching over nothing” (145). Moonlight seems to symbolize Gatsby and Daisy’s love: their first kiss occurred one night in Louisville when “they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight … [Gatsby] waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her” (110-111). But like moonlight itself, Daisy’s love is cold and impermanent.

As to Weston’s point that the Fisher King stands between his people and “the unseen forces which control their destiny” (namely the drought that wastes his lands and the rains that result from his salvation), there is much evidence to prove that the same can be said of Gatsby, whose life stages seem to function with the forces of nature. Several of the novel’s important events, especially those pertaining directly to Gatsby, occur at a change of seasons. Nick arrives in Gatsby’s domain of West Egg around the time of the summer solstice; “with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees,” he feels “that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer,” and indeed his life takes a new turn when he meets Gatsby (4). The day that Daisy and Gatsby choose to reveal their affair to Tom – also the day of Myrtle’s death – is “almost
the last, certainly the warmest, day of summer” (114). Most importantly, the day on
which Gatsby is killed holds “an autumn flavor in the air.” Gatsby’s death is sprinkled
with images of autumn: it is a “cool, lovely day” when Gatsby walks to his pool against
the backdrop of “yellowing trees,” and his gardener tells him that he intends to drain the
pool since “leaves’ll be falling pretty soon” (153). When Gatsby’s body is later
discovered, “a small gust of wind” blows the mattress on which he floats, and around it
revolves “a cluster of leaves” (162). Here it is important to remember that in Cyprus, the
death of Adonis – predecessor to the Fisher King – falls “on the 23rd of September, his
resurrection on the 1st of October,” and his feast is celebrated on the autumnal equinox
(Weston 46). Given Nick’s references to the weather, it is likely that Gatsby’s death also
falls on or around September 23rd, the day after what Nick calls “almost the last … day of
summer.”

Here I must pause in my analysis of Gatsby’s connection to the seasons to point
out an intriguing similarity between Gatsby, Adonis, and the Fisher King that the
previous argument illuminates. Gatsby is discovered floating on a “laden mattress” that
“moved irregularly down the pool” like a bier carrying him to a watery grave (162). This
scene bears a striking resemblance to Weston’s description of the “ceremonies of
mourning for the dead god” Adonis, in which mourners “commit[ed] his effigy to the
waves”; in some variations of the ceremony an effigy or head was borne “by a current …
to Byblos” (Weston 47). Furthermore, in grail legend, the quester often finds upon
arrival at the grail castle “either a dead knight on a bier (as in the Gawain versions), or a
wounded king on a litter” (Weston 48). It is difficult to deny that the portrayal of
Gatsby’s death scene mirrors these images of Adonis’s and the grail king’s lifeless bodies. This point has also been asserted by critic Jeffrey Hart, who argues that “at the end Gatsby himself surrounded by dead leaves lies in his pool, death by water, like the dead fertility god of the myths” (208).

Just as the death of Adonis occurs in the early autumn, Gatsby’s funeral takes place at the end of September or perhaps the 1st of October, the exact date of Adonis’s resurrection in Cyprus. As previously established, Gatsby was killed on or around the first day of autumn, and “it was on the third day that a telegram signed Henry C. Gatz arrived from a town in Minnesota. It said only that the sender was leaving immediately and to postpone the funeral until he came” (Fitzgerald 167). It would have taken Mr. Gatz two or three days to travel to New York from his small Minnesota town, and the funeral occurs the day after his arrival, placing the date in late September or early October. Apropos to the season, rain pervades the description of Gatsby’s funeral: the mourners’ cars “reached the cemetery and stopped in a thick drizzle beside the gate – first a motor hearse, horribly black and wet,” followed by a few of Gatsby’s servants, “all wet to the skin.” Owl Eyes appears, “splashing … over the soggy ground … the rain poured down his thick glasses, and he took them off and wiped them to see the protecting canvas unrolled from Gatsby’s grave.” As the mourners straggle away “through the rain,” one of them murmurs, “‘Blessed are the dead that the rain falls on’” (174-175). This benediction, along with the persistent rain – we must remember that the regeneration of the Fisher King resulted in rains that brought life back to his lands – suggests Gatsby’s resurrection. As connected as he is to the forces of the earth, it is natural that his
resurrection should bring rain to the scorched lands on which the inhabitants of Long Island suffered only a week before. Nick describes the effects of the “broiling” heat that preceded Gatsby’s death:

   As my train emerged from the tunnel into sunlight, only the hot whistles of the National Biscuit Company broke the simmering hush at noon. The straw seats of the car hovered on the edge of combustion; the woman next to me perspired delicately for a while into her white shirtwaist, and then, as her newspaper dampened under her fingers, lapsed despairingly into deep heat with a desolate cry. (115)

New York and its citizens are plagued by this dangerously dry heat, which is only broken by Gatsby’s death and the “thick drizzle” that begins the day of his funeral, suggesting that Gatsby’s resurrection directly influences the well being of his land (174). This seems to be an inescapable allusion to both the Fisher King and Adonis, whose resurrections bring rain and therefore life back to their own parched lands.

   As Gatsby’s connection with the seasons compels us to consider him as a prototype of the Fisher King / Adonis, so does Gatsby’s constant affiliation with water throughout the novel. We must remember that “the Grail castle is always situated in the close vicinity of water, either on or near the sea, or on the banks of an important river,” and that furthermore “the presence of water, either sea, or river, is an important feature in the Adonis cult” (51). As many critics have already pointed out, myriad water images permeate The Great Gatsby. Robert A. Martin notes in “Gatsby and the Dutch Sailors” that “Gatsby is associated with water and nautical objects connected with water” (61).
Glenn Settle, in “Fitzgerald’s Daisy: The Siren Song,” finds it possible “that Jay Gatsby in Nick Carraway’s story is on an epic seafaring quest when he meets Daisy” (116). In her article “Gatsby as a Drowned Sailor,” Margaret Lukens remarks on “how profoundly informed the prose is by marine imagery” (44). The well-established importance of water symbolism can be reconciled with the seemingly unrelated yet equally notable presence of the grail motif by reading Gatsby as the Fisher King and not the quester.

Like the Fisher King whose castle is “always situated in the close vicinity of water,” Gatsby’s physical propinquity to Long Island Sound is particularly emphasized in descriptions of his mansion. Very much like a castle itself, Gatsby’s home is likened to “some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side … and a marble swimming pool.” Gatsby’s castle is located “only fifty yards from the Sound,” across from which “the fashionable palaces of East Egg glittered along the water” (5). Here we find a double allusion to the grail castle; it is equally significant to my analysis that Gatsby’s house is not only proximal to the sea, but is clearly defined as a palatial structure.

Beyond its location on the shore, Gatsby’s castle is often characterized by its aquatic features, as is Gatsby himself. Before meeting him, Nick says that “I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana” (49). Later Nick visualizes Gatsby, in his mythical wealth and prosperity, “in his palace on the Grand Canal” (67). Among Gatsby’s party guests, “there was one persistent story that [Gatsby] didn’t live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore” (97). Gatsby’s parties take place in his “blue gardens,” and Nick explains that “at high tide in the
afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor-boats slit the water of the Sound, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam” (39). In the evening, when “the last swimmers have come in from the beach,” Nick notes that “cars are parked five deep” in the driveway, and “floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden.” Here laughter is “spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word” (40). Gatsby’s guests “glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color,” and Nick finds himself “among swirls and eddies of people” as “a tray of cocktails floated at [him] through the twilight” (41, 43). By late evening, “the moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjoes” (46-47).

Along with the profusion of water in these descriptions, it is important to note the fish imagery that Fitzgerald develops here, which is intensified when Nick later describes “all these people [who] came to Gatsby’s house in the summer.” These guests include “Doctor Webster Civet, who was drowned last summer up in Maine … the Fishguards … Ripley Snells … S.B. Whitebait … the Hammerheads, and Beluga the tobacco importer, and Beluga’s girls” (61-62).

Weston insists that the “Fish is a Life symbol of immemorial antiquity,” and numerous ancient cultures’ mythology corroborates this meaning (125). One legend that Weston cites as an origin of the Fisher King is Borron’s *Joseph of Arimathea*, the first text to narrate Joseph’s inheritance of the Holy Grail. Weston explains that “during the wanderings of that holy man and his companions in the wilderness, certain of the company fell into sin. By the command of God, Brons, Joseph’s brother-in-law, caught a
Fish, which, with the Grail, provided a mystic meal of which the unworthy cannot partake” (116). If we carefully read through the descriptions of Gatsby’s party, we notice a conspicuous lack of any description of eating, though Gatsby provides the mystic meal: “spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold” (40). Gatsby’s guests, a gluttonous, ungracious, and unruly bunch who gratuitously drink alcohol and slander their host “on the courage of Gatsby’s liquor” are never described as partaking of the feast, for certainly they are among the “unworthy” (169). Yet the feast is offered; Gatsby provides the sustenance.

Gatsby’s association with the Fisher King – and therefore with the fish symbol – illuminates further fascinating connections with Adonis, himself an ancient life symbol and the heart of mystic cults. Like Adonis, Gatsby becomes the center of hedonistic rituals, and like both the Fisher King and Adonis, Gatsby is emasculated by his disastrous passion for a bewitching woman.

The worship of Adonis, we must remember, was the worship of a life force. The belief that the nature god died each autumn and came back to life each spring was cause for lamentation and celebration marked by rites of a very specific nature. According to Farnell’s The Cults of the Greek States, the birth and death rites of the Adonis cults included “‘the din of cymbals and drums, the meaningless ecstasies of sorrow and joy’” (Weston 46). Weston relates certain intriguing details of these rituals. The celebration was always marked by a feast, which followed or preceded the practice of casting an effigy or a papyrus head of the god into the ocean. Weston also states that “the most notable feature of the ritual was the prominence assigned to women” and, quoting Vellay,
that “‘it is the women who weep for him and accompany him to his tomb. They sob wildly all night long’” (47). Furthermore, “one very curious practice during these celebrations was that of cutting off the hair in honour of the god,” an obligation that also fell to the women of the cults.

Weston ties these practices to grail legend, in which we find our “wounded king on a litter; when wounded the injury corresponds to that suffered by Adonis” (48). Adonis’s death wound, which steals him from the earth and along with him all of earth’s generative powers, is “closely connected with the wounding of the king.” Adonis’s absence from earth and the resulting infertile seasons echo “the destruction which has fallen on the land, which will be removed when the king is healed” in grail legend, just as the earth will come back to life when Adonis is reborn (48). Weston also connects the women’s roles in the Adonis myth to features of the grail story such as “the presence of a weeping woman, or several weeping women” in the grail castle, and the “curious detail of a maiden who has lost her hair as a result of the … sickness of the Fisher King” (49, 51).

Each of these details bears a distinctive and fascinating connection to events at Gatsby’s parties. Echoing “‘the din of cymbals and drums, the meaningless ecstasies of sorrow and joy,’” Gatsby’s festivities feature “a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolo, and low and high drums.” The clamor increases as the night progresses: “as the earth lurches away from the sun … the opera of voices pitches a key higher,” and “by midnight the hilarity had increased” (Fitzgerald 46). In the small hours of the morning, there is “uncontrollable laughter” as the “fraternal hilarity increased;” later Nick describes the “bizarre and tumultuous scene” of a car
accident, in which “a harsh, discordant din … had been audible for some time, and added to the already violent confusion of the scene” (47, 50, 53). Inside Gatsby’s house, when the chaos has reached its apex, we are told of

a tall, red-haired young lady from a famous chorus, engaged in song. She had drunk a quantity of champagne, and during the course of her song she had decided, ineptly, that everything was very, very sad – she was not only singing, she was weeping too. Whenever there was a pause in the song she filled it with gasping, broken sobs, and then took up the lyric again in a quavering soprano.

The tears coursed down her cheeks. (51, emphasis added)

The presence of this weeping woman bears a fascinating resemblance to the weeping women in the Adonis rituals and in grail legend. Furthermore, hauntingly reminiscent of the “maiden who has lost her hair” in grail legend and the women who cut off their hair in the nature rituals is the presence at Gatsby’s parties of women with “hair shorn in strange new ways” (40). In isolation, these strange hair cuts may be dismissed as nothing but a fashion of the era, and the portrayal of the weeping singer may simply attest to the egregious drunkenness at the party; however, when juxtaposed with the numerous allusions presented in this scene, these images become hauntingly reminiscent of cult ritual turned grail legend.

Additionally, later in the summer, a curious incident arises in which a very drunk Miss Baedeker complains of having her head dunked in a swimming pool: one of her friends accuses another, “‘You got her dress all wet when you stuck her head in a pool,’” to which Miss Baedeker responds, “‘Anything I hate is to get my head stuck in a pool …
They almost drowned me once over in New Jersey” (106). This strange image of the repeated immersion of Miss Baedeker’s head unmistakably calls to mind the Adonis cult’s ritualistic practice of casting a papyrus head into the waves.

Weston also makes reference, in her explanation of the origin of the grail knights, to a ritual of the Maruts as they worshipped their god Indra, freer of the waters; in this ritual, “youths of equal age and identical parentage … are always depicted as attired in the same manner.” These youthful twins “are presented as Dancers, and always as Dancers” (82). Weston goes on to explain that “the importance of movement, notably of what we may call group movement, as a stimulant to natural energies, is thoroughly recognized among primitive peoples” (88). Here we find a striking parallel to yet another mysterious feature of Gatsby’s party: “two girls in twin yellow dresses” who perform a dance in the midst of an increasingly frenzied scene:

there was dancing now on the canvas in the garden … a great number of single girls dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps … between the numbers people were doing “stunts” all over the garden while happy, vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky. A pair of stage twins, who turned out to be the girls in yellow, did a baby act in costume. (42, 46)

This striking similarity between the Mouretes twins who dance to worship Indra, predecessor of Adonis and therefore of the Fisher King, and the twin flappers who dance in celebration of the hedonistic bacchanal that is a tribute to Gatsby’s riches cannot be ignored, nor can it easily be explained if one is to read Gatsby as a quester. Nor can
Gatsby’s parties simply be explained as an image of the corruption of the Lost Generation, a snapshot of hilarity and profligacy, for Nick feels at one point in the evening that “the scene had changed before [his] eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound” (47). The significance that Nick detects evokes the “meaningless joys and ecstasies” of the nature rituals: the intense emotions and frantic actions of the celebrants may become chaotic, but they are centered on the worship of their god. Gatsby, whose energies are given to “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty,” becomes the god of these venal partygoers who worship his mystery, his money, his excess (98). They revere him in their vapid way, for “there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world” (44). Their secret accusations that Gatsby is a bootlegger, a German spy, even a murderer, are alleged “eagerly” in tones of “enthusiasm” and “romantic speculation,” indicating more admiration than disapproval of Gatsby’s mysterious power (44). His elevation to a god-like being further supports Gatsby’s complex role as counterpart to Adonis and the Fisher King.

Two curious symbols present themselves at Gatsby’s party: there is a repeated emphasis on the “finger-bowls” in which the champagne is served, and Nick uses the intriguing metaphor of a woman hissing at her husband “like an angry diamond” (46, 47, 51). It is possible to read these images as grail symbols, the bowl representing the chalice or cup that is often associated with the shape of the grail, and the diamond’s sharp, cutting properties affiliated with the lance carried by grail knights and the maidens in the grail castle. Seeking the origin of the grail symbols – the lance, or spear, and the cup, or
chalice – Weston discovers that “they are sex symbols of immemorial antiquity and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup, or Vase, the Female, reproductive energy” (Weston 75). She goes on to explain that these symbols “exist to-day as the four suits of the Tarot” (77). Said to have come from Egypt, the Tarot bears resemblance to designs found in Egyptian temples, “notably in astronomic designs on the ceiling of one of the halls of the palace of Medinet Abou… and also repeated in a calendar sculptured on the southern façade of the same building… This calendar is supposed to have been connected with the periodic rise and fall of the waters of the Nile.” She goes on to explain that “the Tarot has also been connected with an ancient Chinese monument, traditionally erected in commemoration of the drying up of the water of the Deluge by Yao” (78). Therefore, she concludes, these ancient symbols of the tarot, transubstantiated into the symbols of the grail, were used “to predict the rise and fall of the waters that brought fertility to the land” (80). It is appropriate that as symbols of the ebb and flow of sacred waters, the cup and lance exist among the plethora of water images in Gatsby’s seaside castle. It is equally apt that these symbols of sexuality and fertility should appear at Gatsby’s parties, which are thrown in an attempt to draw Daisy back to him, to seduce her with the power of his wealth.

In Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship we find yet another point of comparison between Gatsby, Adonis, and the Fisher King. Weston reminds us of the mythological tale of Adonis, “a fair youth, beloved of Aphrodite, who, wounded in the thigh by a wild boar, died of his wound” (43). However, she points out that “writers upon the subject are of one accord in considering the usual account to be but a euphemistic veiling of the truth
... the true reason for his universal mourning was the cessation, or suspension, by injury or death, of the reproductive energy of the god upon whose virile activity vegetable life directly, and human life indirectly, depended" (44). Adonis’s thigh wound is a euphemism for what classical scholars believe to be castration, a jealous punishment inflicted on Adonis by Aphrodite’s vengeful lover, Ares; hence the “cessation … of the reproductive energy” and “virile activity.” Likewise in grail legend, Sone de Nansai recounts the Fisher King’s emasculating injury as punishment for the blasphemy of loving a pagan princess: “‘His loins are stricken by this bane / From which he suffers lasting pain’” (22). Gatsby shares the affliction of Adonis and the Fisher King; he too has been emasculated, his loss of virility a direct repercussion of his dangerous and inappropriate love for Daisy.

It follows, then, that Daisy fulfills the role of the injurious enchantress who ensnares and ultimately destroys her lover. A close examination of The Great Gatsby does indeed reveal several similarities not only between Daisy and the pagan princess of grail legend, but between Daisy and Aphrodite as well.

Evidence linking Daisy to the pagan princess exists throughout the novel. Daisy is often characterized as royalty: she lives in “the white palaces of fashionable East Egg”; Nick perceives her to be “high in the white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl” (5, 120). Even in her youth, Daisy is described as “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (150). Her maiden name, “Daisy Fay,” evokes Morgan le Fay, evil pagan princess and King Arthur’s sister (74). Not only is Daisy extremely wealthy, but her wealth becomes a defining feature: Gatsby and Nick agree
that “‘her voice is full of money’ … that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the cymbals’ song of it” (120). There is a hint of idolatry in her voice, not only is it redolent of money, but its “cymbals’ song” recalls the music of “cymbals and drums” commonly played in ceremonies for Adonis (Weston 46). This sense of idolatry unveils itself to Nick in other ways as well. Nick enters Daisy’s house twice during the novel, and on each occasion Daisy appears to him as a statue draped in fluttering white garments: at the beginning of the novel, when Nick joins the Buchanans for dinner, he sees “an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back after a short flight around the house” (8). Later, Nick describes a similar scene when he enters the Buchanans’ house before the disastrous trip to New York: “the room, shadowed well with awnings, was dark and cool. Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans” (115). This repeated image of Daisy as an idol, a statue enshrouded in white and waiting to be worshipped in a darkened sanctuary, elevates her to the untouchable status of the divine, therefore affiliating her not only with the pagan princess, but also with the goddess Aphrodite.

Several images in The Great Gatsby reinforce the connection between Daisy and Aphrodite, which in turn emphasizes the relationship between Gatsby and Adonis. The suffusion of roses and the colors red, white, and gold throughout the novel, which add to the famed lyrical beauty of Fitzgerald’s prose, also metonymically associate Daisy with Aphrodite. In the Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Pierre Grimal explains that
the story of Adonis provides a basis for myths such as that of the origin … of the red rose, which was originally white. As Aphrodite ran to Adonis’s assistance she pricked her foot on a thorn and the flowers dedicated to him were coloured by her blood … The poet Bion tells us that the goddess shed as many tears as Adonis shed drops of blood; from each tear sprang a rose. (14)

This myth establishes the rose and the colors red and white as symbols of Aphrodite; gold becomes associated with the goddess in the story of the Judgment of Paris, in which Aphrodite receives a golden apple in honor of her superior beauty. Furthermore, throughout the Homeric Hymns, Aphrodite is praised as “the golden one,” for she is not only the loveliest and most irresistible of all goddesses, but is also often adorned in gold. In “The Hymn to Aphrodite,” Homer writes, “Ah Muse / tell me about the things that Aphrodite / does, the golden one … she who awakens a pleasant yearning in / gods, she who subdues the race of mortal / men” (69). In “The Second Hymn to Aphrodite,” Homer praises her as

golden-crowned,

beautiful Aphrodite …

On her immortal head

they placed a crown

that was carefully made,

beautifully and in gold

and in the pierced lobes of her ears

they placed
flowers of copper
and of precious gold.
On her delicate neck
and her silver-white breasts
they arranged
necklaces of gold. (69, 81)

Like Aphrodite, Daisy is often surrounded by roses, and her world is redolent of red,
gold, and white. She lives in a “red-and-white” mansion fringed by “burning gardens”
and “a half acre of deep, pungent roses”; the windows of her home “glow … with
reflected gold” (6, 7). When Nick enters her house, he notices a “rosy-colored space,”
windows of “gleaming white,” and white curtains that ripple in the wind toward “the
frosted wedding cake of the ceiling” and over “the wine-colored rug” (7, 8). Her porch is
“rosy-colored,” her chatter with Miss Baker “as cool as their white dresses” (11, 12). The
sun seems to embrace her; as evening falls, “the last sunshine fell with romantic affection
upon her glowing face” (14). Even in the dark, “her eyes flashed” and inside, her
“crimson room bloomed with light” (17). Discussing Jordan, Daisy tells Nick that “our
white girlhood was passed together there. Our beautiful white —” and insists that Nick is
“a rose, an absolute rose” (19, 14). This imagery continues when Gatsby and Daisy
reunite at Gatsby’s mansion amid “the pale gold odor of kiss-me-at-the-gate” (90). They
walk through “bedrooms swathed in rose” until they reach Gatsby’s apartment, in which
Daisy admires “a toilet set of pure gold” (91). As Gatsby and Daisy look out the window
toward the Sound, they see “a pink and golden billow of foamy clouds above the sea,”
and Daisy murmurs, “I’d like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around” (94). In light of this abundant imagery, Nick’s description of Daisy as “the golden girl” may acquire additional meaning as an echo of the Homeric epithet exalting Aphrodite. It is also interesting that from Daisy’s veranda, Nick observes the following scene: “over the rose-beds … the white wings of the boat moved against the blue cool limit of the sky. Ahead lay the scalloped ocean and the abounding blessed isles” (118). This specific description is remarkably reminiscent of Botticelli’s famous painting *The Birth of Venus*, in which Aphrodite rises from the water, standing in a white scalloped shell among roses blown about on the breeze, the blessed land stretching into the sea behind her.

Just as Aphrodite’s love corrupts Adonis’s vitality, Daisy functions as anathema to the limitless potential of the young, idealistic Gatsby, who “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (much like Aphrodite sprang from the foamy waters of the sea). Truly a self-made man, Gatsby is born on the waters of Lake Superior – Nick tells us that “it was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat, pulled out to the *Tuolomee*, and informed Cody that the wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour.” A product of his own imagination, Gatsby as a young man knew no limits. His “brown, hardening body lived naturally though the half-fierce, half-lazy work of the bracing days. He knew women early” (98). If not happy, Gatsby was virile and independent; however, when he met Daisy in October 1917 his life became “confused and disordered… 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 … then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete” (110-111). This passage is full of imagery that suggests a change more profound than falling in love: Gatsby in fact exchanges something akin to immortality for his disastrous passion for this mortal woman. By giving himself to Daisy, Gatsby sacrifices his power, becomes “incarnate,” and relinquishes his freedom to fulfill his infinite hopes for himself. Therefore, when Daisy leaves him for Tom, he is wounded in an emasculating and ultimately fatal way. He has lost everything: his virility, his independence, and Daisy. As if consecrating his sad degeneration, Gatsby returns to Louisville after Daisy has married Tom. Pulling away from the city on the train, Gatsby “stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot that she had made lovely for him. But it was all going by too fast now for his blurred eyes and he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever” (153). This tremendous loss is what leaves Gatsby disabled, his regenerative powers wrenched away; he has lost the ability to “romp … like the mind of God,” to fulfill his “Platonic conception of himself.” Like the Fisher King and Adonis, Gatsby is symbolically stripped of his reproductive abilities.

It is in this condition that Nick discovers Gatsby, and as he attempts to restore Gatsby to vitality, Nick attains an understanding of humanity and mortality that renders him akin to the quester in grail legend. Having established the numerous connections between Gatsby and the Fisher King, it is now time to examine Nick’s role as the quester.
Chapter 4

NICK AS QUESTER

Grail legend is shrouded in mystery, and perhaps no aspect of the myth is as intriguing as the nature of the grail itself. Writers and scholars of grail legend have surmised that the grail was a religious relic, assumed to be the chalice from which Jesus Christ ate and drank during the Last Supper and which was later used to collect his blood as he died on the cross. Other variations of the grail mystery, such as J.F. Campbell’s *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, claim that the vessel closely resembles a Gaelic talisman and therefore is likely Celtic in origin. However, the latter argument was not introduced until 1860, and as many scholars have claimed, it seems to lack a thorough explanation of the grail’s vastly mystical and deeply religious aura. As to the explanation that its roots exist in Christianity, there are further perplexing dilemmas; to this end, grail scholar Richard Barber poses such questions as: “How can medieval romances apparently invade the province of medieval religion, and how can secular authors write about the highest mysteries of the Church? Why, when the medieval church never officially recognised the Grail stories, did the Grail become a powerful religious icon, but only to non-clerics?” These seemingly unanswerable questions lead most scholars to the conclusion that, as Barber posits, “The Grail owes its existence to the shadowy borderland between imagination and belief, which are the two recurrent influences on its development.”

To Weston, it is precisely this shadowy borderland that, when carefully explored, illuminates the mystery. She asserts that “students of the Grail literature cannot fail to
have been impressed by a certain atmosphere of awe and mystery which surrounds the enigmatic vessel. There is a secret connected with it, the revelation of which will entail dire misfortune on the betrayer” (137). However, there is one group of men who may impart this sacrosanct truth, though they may “shake with fear” in telling it. In Potvin’s tale of Perceval, the quester meets a maiden in the forest and inquires after the grail; her response is as follows: “‘No lady, girl, or maid may say it / Nor may any man betray it / Who is wedded to a wife. / Only a man of holy life / Or a priest of this may tell / Revealing all its wondrous spell / Which no one can ever hear / Without turning pale with fear’” (138). The fact that only a holy man or priest may possess the truth, Weston claims, reconciles the disparate theories of the grail as the sacred chalice of the Eucharist in Christian tradition and as food-providing vessel of Celtic folklore. The link that connects these two beliefs can be found in pre-Christian nature cult rituals, whose most sacred rites entailed two distinctive purposes. To quote Weston,

Such rites possessed a two-fold character – *exoteric*; in celebration openly and publicly performed, in which all adherents of that particular cult could join freely, the object of such public rites being to obtain some external and material benefit, whether for the individual worshipper, or for the community as a whole – *esoteric*; rites open only to a favoured few, the initiates, the object of which appears, as a rule, to have been individual rather than social, and *non*-material. In some cases, certainly, the object aimed at was the attainment of a conscious, ecstatic, union with the god, and the definite assurance of a future life. In other words there was the public worship, and there were the Mysteries. (140)
Explaining this as the origin of grail legend, Weston concludes that the “exoteric” cult rituals evolved into the folklore elements of grail legend, such as the suffering king and the task of the hero, whereas the “esoteric” rites inspired the divine elements of the legend: “the Mystic Meal, the Food of Life, connected in some mysterious way with a Vessel which is the center of the cult... a combination bearing a well-known ‘generative’ significance” (158-159).

Worshipers of the Attis cults celebrated the exoteric and esoteric rituals that Weston describes. On the vernal equinox, the cults observed both the public feast and “the Mystery feast, of which the initiated alone were privileged to partake” (144). During this mystic meal, food was served in sacred vessels, believed to be the “Food of Life” for the initiates (146). Weston explains that “the fate of the initiate was connected with, and dependent upon, the death and resurrection of the god”; she cites Dieterich’s study of the Attis/Adonis cult initiations, remarking that

What he relates can be applied to the devotees of Attis and to those of Adonis. This is what he says: “On a certain night the image is placed, lying on its back, on a litter, and the devotees mourn it with rhymic lamentations. At length, when they have satisfied themselves with the pretended lamentation, a light is brought in. Then the throats of all those who were weeping are anointed by the priest, and after they have been anointed, he slowly murmurs these words to them: ‘Have courage, O initiates of the saviour-god, / For there will be salvation for us from our toils.’” (146-147)
Thus we have the motif from the Adonis mysteries of the initiate mourning the death of the god, seeking apotheosis in the god’s resurrection. Interpreted to explain the mystery of the grail, this ritual becomes for the quester “the ultimate proof of the successful issue of the final test in the restoration of the King” (159).

Turning now to The Great Gatsby, we will see that several elements of these initiation rites are echoed in the novel; specifically pertaining to Nick, they affirm his role as quester/initiate. A careful examination of Nick’s actions, intentions, and experiences in the novel, along with an analysis of his relationship with Gatsby, reveals considerable evidence that, despite Nick’s casual and unsubstantiated remark that Gatsby “had committed himself to the following of a grail,” Nick, not Gatsby, is the true quester in the novel. Furthermore, examination of the evidence will demonstrate that the quest in the novel is not focused on a solitary object or person, but is in fact, like the ancient ritual reinvented as grail quest, “a double initiation into the source of the lower and higher spheres of Life” (Weston 159).

Like any promising initiate, Nick naturally possesses a keen insight into the thoughts and emotions of others. His self-proclaimed tolerance “has opened up many curious natures to [him]” and, whether he likes it or not, has rendered him “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” (1). These early assertions about his character immediately establish Nick as a young man with an intrinsic perception of human nature, which is later intensified after Gatsby has died and Nick’s initiation is complete. Early in the novel, Nick alludes to an extraordinary gnosis of humanity that his relationship with Gatsby has provided: the “riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human
heart” that he has so strenuously attained over the course of his summer in New York and the “interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” that his ordeal with Gatsby “temporarily closed out” (2, emphasis added). Nick acquires this knowledge throughout the novel, and therefore it is necessary for now to refer to this passage in isolation; further discussion of this point will occur in the following pages. In the meantime, however, a close look at Fitzgerald’s language here unveils Nick’s heightened understanding of human nature, for Nick possesses a “privileged” insight “into the human heart,” and an ongoing attempt to seek greater awareness, for his interest in human emotions is only “temporarily” forestalled by Gatsby’s death.

It is precisely to gain knowledge and experience that Nick moves from the Midwest to New York. He explains that after serving in the Great War, “I came back restless. Instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe – so I decided to go East” (3). Despite his claim that he moved to New York “to learn the bond business,” the majority of this passage implies Nick’s need to find himself in the center of the world again; this assertion belies his statement that the move was purely vocational. So fulfilling does this move seem to Nick that he ascribes to it a sense of great hope and vitality:

And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.

There was so much to read, for one thing, and so much fine health to be pulled down out of the young breath-giving air. (4)
Both physical and spiritual fulfillment await Nick in his new home; he even senses the promise of “the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew” (4). While most critics assume that the Morgan referred to here is the American financier J.P. Morgan, I would suggest an alternative explanation: the placement of the name between two other ancient personages suggests that this may be an allusion to Morgan le Fey, sorceress and noblewoman of grail legend. Consider the parallel reference to King Midas: Ovid tells us that although everything Midas touched turned to gold, his riches became a curse to him as he could neither eat nor drink, and everything that so much as grazed his body froze into a golden statue of itself. Midas was eventually absolved of this burden, but as he continued to displease the gods, he was given the ears of an ass. Surely Midas’s riches are not an object for envy. However, in Phrygian mythology, Midas was closely connected with Kybele, the earth goddess; in some versions of the myth he was believed to be Kybele’s son. Herein lies the crux: Kybele is an important goddess of the nature cults; she was associated with Attis and often worshipped alongside of him. Weston tells us that in ancient Rome, “Claudius … instituted public feasts in honour of Kybele and Attis, feasts which were celebrated at the Spring solstice” (144). Perhaps Midas’s gold is not as relevant to Nick, the quester/initiate, as his association with Kybele, earth goddess and celebrant of sacred life rituals. Furthermore, if we consider the significance in this context of Maecenas – ancient patron of literature, immortalized by Horace and Virgil – we find a reference to one in possession of great knowledge as well as great wealth. Adding Morgan le Fey to this list of names elicits not only grail legend, but also a supernatural context in which “the shining secrets” that Nick
covets take on a new meaning: not only can they secure him material wealth, but they may also impart the extraordinary knowledge of these ancient sovereigns.

In Nick’s description of his family and home, we find several intriguing connections to grail legend. Early in the novel, he states that his family is “descended from the Dukes of Buccleuth” (3). This title, created in the seventeenth century for the Duke of Monmouth, hearkens back to a name that holds great significance in grail legend: Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose writings – especially “The History of the Kings of Britain” – were considered to be the primary sources for Arthurian legend.

A more striking correlation to grail mythology – and one that unmistakably associates Nick with the quester – exists in Nick’s circumstances when he leaves the Midwest and arrives in New York. Nick explains,

I had just left a country of wide lawns and friendly trees, so when a young man at the office suggested that we take a house together in a commuting town, it sounded like a great idea. He found the house, a weather-beaten cardboard bungalow at eighty a month, but at the last minute the firm ordered him to Washington, and I went out to the country alone. (3)

The motifs embedded in this passage, specifically Nick’s verdant Midwestern home and his subsequent isolation on Long Island in a house that he describes as something of a rustic hermitage, closely resembles the story of Perceval’s solitary upbringing in the forest and ensuing journey to the court of King Arthur. Grail legend tells us that Perceval, raised alone by his mother in the woodlands of Wales, is “simple of heart, honest and upright,” yet found himself “discontented suddenly and longing for he knew
not what” (Green 198). One day, while walking alone in the forest, he meets five knights of King Arthur’s court who persuade him to leave his home and journey to Caerleon to become a knight of the Round Table. Departing the forest of his youth, he is initially lonesome and anxious, but soon becomes hopeful and eager for adventure. Upon reaching King Arthur’s court, he finds that his inexperience renders him unworthy of residing in that sacred place and becoming a knight; first, he must prove himself by undertaking a quest. Upon completion of his first task, he meets with another solitary knight, Gonemans, who insists that Perceval must reside with him for the summer in his “ancient manor-house” to learn the duties of a worthy knight (207). Perceval agrees and spends the summer living in the country as Goneman’s pupil. At the end of the summer, he is finally prepared to return to King Arthur’s court, where he eventually seeks and, in many versions of the legend, attains the grail.

There are several interesting parallels here between Nick and Perceval. Like Perceval, Nick grows up in a wooded, rural home, secluded from the action and adventure of a Caerleon or a New York City, isolated at “the ragged edge of the universe” (Fitzgerald 3). Both Nick and Perceval are destined to meet with a force that calls them from their safe home: Perceval’s mother knows that when he meets King Arthur’s knights, “the appointed time had come when she must lose her son”; similarly, fate lures Nick away from his hearth when he’s called to serve in World War I and afterwards becomes restless in the Midwest (Green 200). Like Perceval, Nick is initially “lonely” upon leaving home; however, it only takes a day or two for him to feel like “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” out on his own (Fitzgerald 4). However, also like
Perceval, Nick is unable to adapt directly into the heart of the action; as Perceval is not immediately accepted at King Arthur’s court, Nick is unable to transition to life in New York City. Instead, he finds himself living in “the country alone,” but next door to “a colossal affair … some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy” (3, 5). Gatsby’s mansion is where Nick receives an important orientation to New York throughout the summer; at Gatsby’s parties, during the two men’s conversations in Gatsby’s house, and when Nick presides over Gatsby’s body and attempts to plan his funeral, Nick learns the cold realities of life in the East. This too resembles the story of Perceval, who in order to transition into his new life in King Arthur’s court, must first go into the forest and live in the “ancient manner-house” of Gonemans; Perceval “dwelt all that summer in his house,” whereupon he finally possessed the requisite skills of knighthood.

As noted in my summary of From Ritual to Romance, there are several points of contact between the characters of Perceval and a young hermit in Hindu mythology named Richyaçringa; the latter’s solitary upbringing in a forest and isolation from the outside world suggest a link not only with Perceval, but with Nick as well. However, there is yet another likeness that Weston points out between Perceval and Richyaçringa: temptation by a seductress. In the story of Richyaçringa, the young hermit is somehow central to a drought that befalls a neighboring kingdom; the king learns that as long as Richyaçringa remains chaste, the drought will endure. Therefore he summons a beautiful young lady “of irregular life” to seduce Richyaçringa; he sends her to the youth’s home in a boat “fitted out with all possible luxury” (30). Likewise, versions of the Perceval myth tell of that youth’s temptation by a “fiend, in the form of a fair maiden, who comes
to him by water in a vessel hung with black silk, and with great riches on board” (32).
The temptation of these two young men by a seductress, especially one who arrives in a
boat and wields immense fortunes, provides another point of comparison with Nick, who
becomes involved with the shady Jordan Baker.

A “scornful” young lady of “complete self-sufficiency,” Jordan intrigues Nick
with her “erect carriage” and her “wan, charming, discontented face” (Fitzgerald 80, 9,
11). Her manner of speaking is “contemptuous,” her eyes are “impersonal,” and she
seems “to have mastered a certain hardy skepticism” (9, 12). Furthermore she is
“incurably dishonest;” Nick implies that she once cheated in a professional golf match,
then convinced others to lie about it (58). Jordan’s character traits liken her to the
fiendish temptress in the legends of Perceval and Richyaçringa, as does the curious
comment that Daisy makes on the night that Nick and Jordan meet: Daisy tells Nick that
she intends to “arrange a marriage” between Nick and Jordan, and moreover that she
would like to “push [them] out to sea in a boat” (18). Vast riches and luxury accompany
the temptresses of Perceval and Richyaçringa, and Nick and Jordan rendezvous in
notably affluent settings. They first meet at the Buchanans’ “elaborate” house and later
at Gatsby’s extravagant party; along with Gatsby and the Buchanans, they participate in
such profligate activities as engaging “the parlor of a suite in the Plaza Hotel” simply “to
have a mint julep” (6, 126).

While the temptress in the Perceval myth functions primarily as a distraction to
the hero, the seductress of Richyaçringa actually contributes to the youth’s ability to
break the nearby kingdom’s drought, saving the land and therefore the king from
ruination. Jordan, though she possesses few admirable traits, does assist Nick in his principle task as quester: the attempt to heal Gatsby from his debilitating injury.

The healing of the Fisher King, Weston points out, becomes especially important in the Perceval cycle of grail legend:

The distinctive feature of the Perceval version is the insistence upon the sickness, and disability of the ruler of the land, the Fisher King. Regarded first as the direct cause of the wasting of the land, it gradually assumes overwhelming importance, the task of the Quester becomes that of healing the King; the restoration of the land not only falls into the background but the operating cause of its desolation is changed, and finally it disappears from the story altogether. (Weston 13-14)

At first unwittingly but later with careful intention, Nick attempts to cure Gatsby of the devastating wound that Daisy inflicted upon him five years earlier. As I argue in the previous chapter, Daisy struck a disabling blow to Gatsby after he “forever wed[ded] his unutterable visions to her perishable breath,” only to find upon returning home from the war the following year that Daisy had married Tom Buchanan (110). Thereafter, “his mind would never romp again like the mind of God”; instead of fulfilling the infinite possibilities conceived by his omnipotent mind, Gatsby was reduced to one simple task: to win back Daisy, a feat he could accomplish only by committing himself “to the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (98). Until this happens, Gatsby is stuck in a purgatory conceived of his own heartbreak; in a semblance of life he seeks a reprieve from his grievous injury. By aiding in the reunion of Gatsby and Daisy, Nick temporarily heals Gatsby, reinstating him to life at least for a short time.
When Gatsby recognizes Nick as Daisy’s cousin, he acts quickly, engaging Jordan to entice Nick into arranging a reunion. Here again we see Jordan playing the role of the enchantress in the Richyāṛinga tale who is sent by the neighboring king to seduce the young man, for the ultimate benefit of the king himself. Like that king, Gatsby sends Jordan to secure Nick’s help: “‘He wants to know,’” Jordan tells Nick one evening, “‘if you’ll invite Daisy to your house some afternoon and then let him come over’” (78). It is significant that Jordan fulfills this duty on her first date with Nick, and as if to secure his usefulness, kisses him immediately after making her request. “‘You’re just supposed to invite her to tea,’” she tells Nick, whereupon they share their first kiss: “I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms,” Nick tells us. “Her wan, scornful mouth smiled, and so I drew her up again, this time to my face” (80). Jordan’s scornful air seems to intimate an ulterior motive for her actions, and therefore it is not difficult to imagine her in the role of seductress.

Although Nick is initially disinclined to involve himself in the affair – he feels “more annoyed than interested” when Gatsby first panders to his sense of curiosity on the subject – he soon accepts the task of organizing a meeting, and rather than just perfunctorily performing the duty, addresses it with a sense of devotion (67). On the day of the tea, Nick drives to West Egg “to buy some cups and lemons and flowers,” the flowers especially evincing a sudden dedication to the afternoon’s success (84). Growing more interested in the event as it draws nearer, Nick senses and reflects Gatsby’s nervousness; as Daisy arrives he feels “a little harrowed [him]self,” later becoming “aware of the loud beating of [his] own heart” (85-86). As if Nick himself is
experiencing Gatsby’s mortification at the initial awkwardness of Daisy’s arrival, he says, “My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn’t muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head” (86-87). Later he even coaches Gatsby to behave more suavely, telling him, “Daisy’s embarrassed too … You’re acting like a little boy … not only that, but you’re rude. Daisy’s sitting in there all alone”” (87-88).

This encouragement from Nick, as well as his judicious decision to leave the couple alone and wait outside for half an hour, finally influences a meaningful conversation between Gatsby and Daisy. Immediately thereafter, Gatsby exposes a drastically different side of himself; having reunited with Daisy, he is instantaneously reborn: “there was a change in Gatsby that was simply confounding. He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room … there were twinkle-bells of sunshine in the room, he smiled like a weather man, like an ecstatic patron of recurrent light” (89). No longer “pale as death,” as he was before their meeting, Gatsby is now “consumed with wonder” at Daisy’s presence, “possessed by intense life” (86, 92, 96). Nick himself senses that “it was the hour of a profound human change, and excitement was generating on the air” (95). The change is indeed profound; it marks the regeneration of Gatsby. Being with Daisy enthralls and rejuvenates him: like a youth in the throes of first love, he experiences “embarrassment” and “unreasoning joy at her presence” (91-92). For a short time, Gatsby seems to return to a state of innocence; if only temporarily, he is healed of his debilitating wound.
The effects of this regeneration on Gatsby’s lands are subtle but detectable. Suddenly, “his career as Trimalchio was over … the automobiles which turned expectantly into his drive stayed for just a minute and then drove sulkily away” (113). No longer does Gatsby need to fill his home with rowdy drunkards in hope that his past will one day return to him; he is reunited with Daisy and the spell has been broken. As to the parties, “the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes” (114).

Powerful as Gatsby’s rejuvenation is, it is not permanent, though his newfound hope stays with him to the end of his life. During the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom at the Plaza Hotel, despite Daisy’s begging Gatsby not to expose their affair, Gatsby still tells Tom, “‘She’s never loved you, she loves me,’” insisting that “‘Daisy’s leaving you,’” even when it’s painfully obvious to everybody else that Daisy will do no such thing (130, 133). More than just denial, Gatsby’s infinite hope is at work here. His “dead dream fought on” until the very end; as he watches over Daisy’s house late that night, “the sacredness of his vigil” affirms his belief that his life with Daisy is not over (134, 145). The next day, even as Gatsby lingers in his pool and George Wilson lurks towards his house, Gatsby sustains hope; “‘suppos[ing] Daisy’ll call,’” he tells his butler “that if any one phoned word was to be brought to him at the pool” (154, 161). Daisy, of course, does not call, not even after Gatsby’s murder, but the more important point is that Gatsby believed she would. Even though his life with Daisy was ephemeral, even though he could not ultimately be saved, he is at least divested of the pain from his crippling wound, and his extraordinary gift of hope lives on to the end.
Weston reminds us that in order to achieve his quest and restore the king to vitality, the quester must ask an important question: he must inquire as to the nature of the grail, or in some cases, whom the grail serves. For example, in the prose *Perceval*, “the task of the hero consists in asking concerning the Grail, and by doing so, to restore the Fisher King … to health, and youth.” In this version, Perceval fails to ask the question, and is later admonished by a subject, “‘If you had asked what was happening, your question would have cured the king’s infirmity and he would have been restored to youth’” (Weston 14-15). In light of this point, it is worth considering whether there is a question that, if asked, could have saved Gatsby. Certainly inquiring after the true cause of Myrtle’s death and more importantly exposing the fact that Daisy, not Gatsby, killed Myrtle – especially to Tom, who inadvertently or otherwise sent Wilson to Gatsby’s house – could potentially have prevented Wilson’s fanatical murder of Gatsby. However, Nick could not have possibly known what Wilson would do, or that asking further questions about the incident would have made a difference. Nevertheless, there are indications that in other ways, Nick’s failure to access information relevant to Gatsby deprives him of the opportunity to save his friend.

On two different occasions, Nick has a curious flash of some universal, gnostic truth that seems to call to him from his subconscious, but which ultimately evades him, preventing him from imparting some crucial piece of wisdom to Gatsby. The first of these incidents occurs when Gatsby reveals his past to Nick, narrating the moment when he kissed Daisy, trading the limitless potential of his life for the carnal, transient pleasure of her love. Nick’s response is intriguing:
Through all he 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 incommunicable forever. (111)

The lost but obviously vital significance of these words is never revealed, but the “elusive rhythm” of his perception conveys a sense of universality, as if he could share with Gatsby an experience that may somehow help him or illuminate an important truth. We may also gain some clarity on this point by considering a similar yet more concise and urgent realization that Nick has on the morning of Gatsby’s death: “toward dawn I heard a taxi go up Gatsby’s drive, and immediately I jumped out of bed and began to dress – I felt that I had something to tell him, something to warn him about, and morning would be too late” (147). Nick clearly senses the danger that awaits Gatsby, but the revelation that lies just below the surface of his psyche never finally emerges. In both of these cases, Nick seems to be on the verge of some profound insight – in the latter case, one that may actually save Gatsby’s life. But his failure to probe deeper, to ask himself what it was that he so desperately wanted to tell Gatsby, eliminates his chances of saving him. Nick goes to work in New York, and Gatsby is murdered; the quest to save Gatsby has failed.

Although Nick is unable to access the information that will save Gatsby, it is important to note that he has detected something prophetic, some esoteric understanding of the mysterious powers that control humanity, which likens him to the initiate of
ancient ritual. This connection is strengthened as he leaves Gatsby’s mansion for the last time: Nick looks back at Gatsby’s “ancestral home,” reflecting on the evening he first arrived there “three months before”; if this is the first day of autumn, as established in the previous chapter, Nick would have first visited Gatsby’s house right around the summer solstice. Here we must remember Perceval’s summer spent at the “ancient manor-house” of Gonemans, wherein Perceval is initiated into the ways of knighthood; when he leaves at summer’s end, he is ready to return to King Arthur’s court, where he will later commence the ultimate quest (Green 207). Thus associated with Perceval, Nick is now prepared for the final phase of his initiation.

Nick’s tasks as quester and initiate converge after Gatsby’s death. As the quester is charged with the fate of the Fisher King, Nick is still accountable for Gatsby; no longer able to save his life, he still shoulders the responsibility of caring for Gatsby’s body and arranging his funeral rites. Nick is well aware of his duties; soon after Gatsby’s death, he finds himself

on Gatsby’s side, and alone … as he lay in his house and didn’t move or breathe or speak, hour upon hour, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested … I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him: “I’ll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don’t worry. Just trust me and I’ll get somebody for you —.” (164-165)

Nick struggles to gather mourners for Gatsby, but as the widespread indifference becomes apparent to him, his loyalty to Gatsby increases with “a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all” (165).
While considering Nick’s rigorous efforts to arrange a proper funeral for Gatsby, we should remember Weston’s assertion that in the Adonis mystery rituals, “the successful issue of the test of initiation was dependent upon the resurrection and revival of the god” (147). The duty of arranging Gatsby’s death rites falls upon Nick both as a quester who is responsible for the state of the Fisher King’s health and as an initiate who is seeking apotheosis through the resurrection of the god. Nick’s motivation and vigilance eventually pay off, and he is able to assemble a small group that includes Gatsby’s father, Owl Eyes, and a handful of servants. Standing in a “thick drizzle” as Gatsby’s body is lowered into the earth, one mourner whispers, “‘Blessed are the dead that the rain falls on,’” to which Owl Eyes replies, “‘Amen to that’” (175). The benediction is offered, and the rain – an important symbol of regeneration in grail legend – assures us that, as Joan Allen argues, “in death [Gatsby] receives absolution” (175). If the test of the initiate depends on the resurrection of the god, then Gatsby’s resurrection enables Nick’s initiation.

It is Gatsby’s death that imbues Nick with a deeper knowledge of the physical and spiritual world and extraordinary insights into the human heart and mind. It illuminates for Nick many truths about his own life, instigating decisions that change the course of his future. “After Gatsby’s death,” he tells us at the novel’s end, “the East was haunted for me … distorted beyond my eye’s power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home” (176). What changed over the course of the summer, at the beginning of which Nick “came East, permanently, [he] thought” was the new
understanding of the “deficiency” that made Nick “subtly unadaptable to Eastern life,” a fact only illuminated after Gatsby’s death (3, 176). Furthermore, it is after he “came back from the East last autumn” that Nick recognizes the “riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” that his experience with Gatsby revealed to him (2).

Having rejected the vapid artifice of the East for the “real snow” of the pastoral Midwest, it is with a greatly enhanced vision of humanity that Nick returns home (175). On his last night in New York, as Nick sits on Gatsby’s beach, he ponders the “vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house,” invoking the symbol of vegetation, a holy relic of the fertility cults. Nick is suddenly graced with an ability to understand “the last and greatest of all human dreams … an aesthetic contemplation [man] never understood or desired,” as well as man’s “capacity for wonder” (180). Even the well-known last lines of the novel, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,” suggest a spiritual awakening for Nick: the understanding that humans move forward and backwards simultaneously, that in a sense humans do relive the past; after all, he is journeying west, completing the circle, returning home (180). There is a hint of transcendence in Nick’s final reflections: a vision of human experience, an ethereal glimpse of the mystery of time, an acceptance of the eternal – beating forward, borne backward. In this sense, Nick, like the initiates of the ancient fertility cults, has been inaugurated into the mysteries of the physical and spiritual world.
Chapter 5
CONCLUSION

Like many students of American modernist literature, I was drawn to Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* by T.S. Eliot’s great work, *The Waste Land*. Initially interested in writing my thesis on Eliot, and studying Weston’s work for a deeper understanding of his seminal poem, I was struck by the numerous uncanny elements of *The Great Gatsby* that Weston’s work evoked. Certain that several critics had already explicated the ways in which Fitzgerald’s portrayal of the grail quest was influenced by Weston’s explanations of its origins, I was shocked when my research exposed a dearth of such criticism. Several critics, as I note in my introductory chapter, have commented on the grail motif in the novel; Robert Emmitt provides an insightful analysis of the novel’s fertility symbols that undoubtedly hearken to Weston’s book; more than a few critics, including Robert A. Martin and Margaret Lukens, note the pervasive water imagery in the novel. However, in my months of research, I discovered no scholarship that has yet tied together these various strains of criticism, reconciling the novel’s inescapable presence of the grail theme with its myriad fertility cult symbols. It seems to me that reading the grail quest motif in *The Great Gatsby* as a reinvention of the nature cult rituals offers the perfect synthesis of these divergent yet equally important critical studies.

Why, then, has the abundant evidence for this reading been overlooked? Perhaps because Fitzgerald’s novel is so emblematic of the Lost Generation, the tendency is to view it as a cynical social commentary, an ironic critique of the American dream, the
story of a pathetic failure on a grand level. However, while the novel is indeed a cultural anthem, it also recounts the story of a universal human experience. This, according to Joseph Campbell, is the definition of mythology. Viewed as an important mythological work, *The Great Gatsby* has taken on an extraordinary new meaning for me.

As my project comes to a close, perhaps what’s most fascinating is the way in which the end has delivered me back to the beginning. In the tradition of the hermeneutic circle, my analysis of the mythical motifs in *The Great Gatsby* has left me to reconsider Eliot’s influence on the novel, but this time with a much enhanced perspective. It is now clear to me that, more than just emulation, Fitzgerald’s homage to Eliot is a tribute to mythology, to the universal patterns that exist not only in *The Waste Land*, but in stories from the *Rig-Veda*, in which the god Indra is exalted for freeing the waters of the seven rivers of India, therefore restoring life to the land, to the chronicles of the Attis/Adonis mysteries, in which the resurrection of the god restores the earth to vitality and promises everlasting life to his initiates, to the Bible, in which Jesus’ resurrection – the celebration of which occurs shortly after the vernal equinox – is said to bring eternal life to his followers, to grail legend, in which a young, eager hero in search of adventure is able to heal an entire population, and in so doing, procure for himself the promise of divine salvation.

Like all of these works and countless more, *The Great Gatsby* tells a timeless tale of a quest, an enduring story of hope, loss, and renewal. Although it is undoubtedly a chronicle of the Lost Generation, Fitzgerald’s novel possesses archetypal patterns that evoke a timeless folklore, presenting itself as the most important of all literature: that
which reminds us that we are part of a greater human experience. “So we beat on,”
Fitzgerald writes – and indeed we continue to move forward, reinventing our stories and
reshaping our cultural identities – just as we are “borne back ceaselessly into the past”
(180).
WORKS CONSULTED


