

# FITZGERALD'S FOLLY

## Comedy, Reality, and the Immigration Debate in *The Great Gatsby*

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### THE REAL DAISY

Scholars have long believed that the character of Daisy was inspired by Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, and his first love, Genevra King. While this is partially true, Daisy's life and physical description line up much more with those of Mary Harriman Rumsey, with whom Fitzgerald associated on Long Island and whose name he used in a chapter outline for *Gatsby* found written in his copy of the novel *Man's Hope* by Andre Malraux.

Mary Harriman Rumsey was a famous New York socialite, daughter of railroad tycoon E. H. Harriman, and passionate supporter of

eugenics. **Eugenicists believed that modern medicine and charity were causing an overproduction of people with "defective" bloodlines who were passing down hereditary illnesses and lowered mental capacities. They advocated for planned, genetically advantageous marriages, the sterilization of those they saw as "less desirable stock," and discrimination against "inferior races."**

### SOURCES

Newspapers: *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *The New York Times*, *The State Herald* (Colorado).  
*Conversations with F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Judith S. Baughman (University Press of Mississippi, 2004).  
"F. Scott Fitzgerald and Mary Harriman Rumsey: An Untold Story," by Horst H. Kruse (*The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2015).  
*The Great Gatsby*, Original 1925 Edition by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Amazon, 2021).  
"Ken Burns Explores the Complicated Story of the U.S. Response to the Holocaust," by Michael Martin, *All Things Considered* (NPR Sept. 17 2022).  
*Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* by Matthew J. Bruccoli (University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

### INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is considered by many to be "The Great American Novel." In it, the mysterious Jay Gatsby flaunts his newfound wealth in an attempt to win back his dream girl, Daisy, from her rich husband. It is generally presumed to be a serious and tragic love story illustrating the general excesses of the "Roaring Twenties" and representing the elusiveness of "the American Dream." However, these interpretations largely developed after Fitzgerald's death and twenty years after the novel's publication, when much of the cultural knowledge needed to understand it had faded. Fitzgerald left no explanation as to its inspiration but, even upon the book's release, expressed dismay that none of the reviewers knew what it was about.

### THESIS

This thesis argues that *The Great Gatsby* was written as a comedic satire of particular elites Fitzgerald knew on Long Island who were involved in reforming efforts that he found hypocritical.

**The themes of eugenics and immigration run throughout the novel and reflect the efforts of eugenicists at the time, including Mary Harriman Rumsey, to shape U.S. immigration law. They would be successful with the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, passed the year before the publication of *The Great Gatsby*. Not only did the work of American eugenicists inspire Hitler's eugenics program, it prevented refugees like Anne Frank from coming to the United States.**

### METHODS

My work builds on that of Horst H. Kruse, who argues that Fitzgerald and Mary Harriman Rumsey were acquaintances and that Rumsey influenced Fitzgerald's views of the Long Island elite. It relies on newspaper archives, biographical accounts of Rumsey and Fitzgerald, periodicals, interviews, and photographic evidence. I traveled to Long Island to retrace the footsteps of Fitzgerald and Rumsey and to the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton's Firestone Library in order to undertake a meticulous and resource-intensive textual and contextual analysis grounded in archival records.

### THE JOKE'S ON US

Fitzgerald's Editor, Maxwell Perkins, maintained throughout his life that *The Great Gatsby* was written as a satire.

When he began writing *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was living among the Long Island elite while preparing for the opening of his zany, comedic play, *The Vegetable*, which mocks the unrealistic aspirations of middle class people who think they can become anything in a democracy. *The Great Gatsby*, completed in France, mocks the Long Island elite who thought themselves the rightful moral leaders of American society.



### CONCLUSION

As we approach the hundredth birthday of *The Great Gatsby* in 2025, we have the chance to set the record straight as to its inspiration and reflect on the social problems Fitzgerald was seeking to illuminate, which are just as relevant today.

***The Great Gatsby* explores the gap between rich and poor and the ability of Americans to rise in society whether Midwesterners, members of ethnic minorities, or immigrants.**

**The work of eugenicists in crafting the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act invites sober reflection on the impacts of past immigration policy as we think through how to address today's migration crisis.**



Like Tom Buchanan, Mary Harriman Rumsey's husband, Charles Cary Rumsey, was a famous polo player.

Charles C. Rumsey died in a car accident the day after the Fitzgeralds arrived on Long Island. The Rumseys were one of the most prominent families in New York and the news was shocking.

The details of the car accident that killed Charles C. Rumsey are eerily similar to those of the one that killed Myrtle Wilson in *The Great Gatsby*.



The area where Charles C. Rumsey died (shown in photos on left) fits the description of the area in "The Valley of Ashes" where Myrtle Wilson lived and died, complete with a gas station, car dealership, and large billboards.

The bodies of both Charles C. Rumsey and Myrtle Wilson were taken into the local garages where their friends and family members identified them.

Photos courtesy: [https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/mystery\\_friday\\_foto\\_7\\_can\\_you\\_identify\\_this\\_section\\_of\\_a\\_vanderbilt\\_cup\\_race](https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/mystery_friday_foto_7_can_you_identify_this_section_of_a_vanderbilt_cup_race)

**Sculptor Killed in Auto Crash And Wife, Photo Made Week Ago**

