Re-imag(in)ing the Ideal: Notes on Daisy’s Passing in The Great Gatsby
Take for a moment the color "yellow" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Most closely associated with Daisy Buchanan¹, it represents wealth, achievement, and social acceptance to Gatsby; more than that, however, it is representative of the very aura which the author draws for us about the character who is the object of Gatsby's focus. Through his eyes she radiates for the reader as if her very skin were gold. Perhaps it *is*, and perhaps, for Daisy, too, the color yellow stands for all those things, especially social acceptance.

The color "yellow," as in "high-yellow," means, at least among older African-Americans, one who can, in some cases, "pass" for white. These distinctions may seem oddly archaic, or even laughable today, but once they carried with them the cause for discrimination and class differentiation, not only between black and white, but within the African-American community as well. And a daisy is a flower, after all, which is white on the outside and yellow -- or, in some varieties, black -- at the center.

Was Daisy Fay Buchanan the daughter or grand-daughter of a woman who was herself an octaroon, perhaps, and appeared white to all concerned in Louisville society? And what would have happened to the Fay family's social status if it were known that -- for the purposes of race identification as defined by southern statutes -- the family was actually "black?"²

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¹ I recommend Professor Andre Le Vot’s definitive biography of Fitzgerald for a complete breakdown of the importance of color and its relation symbolically to the primary characters of *The Great Gatsby*, especially so Chapter Ten “The Colors in the Crest,” in which a full treatment of the color scheme used by Fitzgerald is laid out.

² Quite simply, the power of the states to legally disenfranchise African-Americans and those of mixed-race parentage through legislatively mandated segregation -- legitimized in 1896 with the Supreme Court’s decision upholding the state’s right to
In the most recent film version of Fitzgerald's tale, Daisy was portrayed by the blonde Mia Farrow, often backlit or shot through a soft filter to enhance the "golden-ness" of her screen image, yet Fitzgerald is very clear on this: Jordan Baker is blonde, and Daisy's hair is, if not black, then so dark as to be nearly so, if Nick Carraway's description that "a damp streak of hair lay like a dash of blue paint across her cheek..." or his retelling of Gatsby's own words of how "once he kissed her dark shining hair...." are any indications. That Daisy says of her daughter Pammy that "she has my hair," we may assume, then, if not in color, for Pammy is blonde, that Daisy may mean in texture, thickness, and manageability. Daisy is seen more than once brushing and pinning her own hair, as if it is unruly. None of the other female characters in the novel pay any attention to their coiffures.

On more than one occasion, knowing winks, nods and pauses, or protests by Jordan -- Jordan Baker is Daisy's child-hood friend and intimate -- seem to indicate that something is going on below the surface of the ordinary interactions of the characters.

It is not just that Tom Buchanan is reading a book called The Rise of the Colored Empires by a man named Goddard, but that, in remarking on it, he provokes a response from Daisy, who wears "an expression of unthoughtful sadness...." as if he is taking the conversation into an area of private concern. She then replies with a frivolous comment designed to deflect the conversation from where it's headed.

When Tom argues that "these books are all scientific," and that "it's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things,..." Daisy whispers "we've got to beat them down,' winking ferociously toward the fervent sun." Is she blinking back tears?

Jordan Baker tries to turn the conversation; is it because Tom is merely boorish?

do so in Plessy v. Ferguson -- would undoubtedly have meant forfeiture of: property, standing in the community, any hope for a decent public education for any offspring, and the full protection of and standing before the law.
We would hardly expect that a character like Tom Buchanan would be a model of late-twentieth-century political correctness in his mode of expression, or, for that matter, that the "refined" sensibilities of the Buchanans and their guests would be deeply offended by the overt espousal of such eugenically inspired "intellectualizing." If, therefore, the things Tom is saying are reflective of much of the real world in which Daisy, Tom, Nick and Jordan lived, why does anyone seek actively to change the subject? Are Daisy and Jordan ahead of their time, or is there another possible explanation?

This instance by itself might be utterly meaningless, if Fitzgerald had been content to leave it at that. Remember that this is the novel which Fitzgerald claimed was his most carefully crafted work. The repetition of Tom’s assertions about racial superiority seems to be an indication that there is something else at work in the novel, for if Fitzgerald wanted merely to prove Tom boorish, the one instance would have been enough. On the other hand, if we were to think Tom really coarse, Fitzgerald could just as easily have given Tom another concern to voice, say, about the Jews or the Irish or the Italians. But the author has Tom reassert himself at this point, cutting Jordan off.

“The idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, (Tom says, speaking to Nick) and you are, (he says, speaking to Jordan) and -- “
After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod, and she winked at me again.

What is the shared secret that passes between this foursome, the unspeakable fact that quite pointedly has to do with Daisy? While Tom and Jordan stroll across the lawn in the late afternoon sunshine, Daisy and Nick walk around the lawn under the covered veranda, and as they talk, she alludes to a "family secret," but claims frivolously that it is about the "butler's nose."

Later that same evening, as they are saying their goodbyes, Daisy and Tom are chatting with Nick about Jordan Baker, who has retired to her room already, when Daisy
“...Besides, Nick's going to look after her, aren't you, Nick? She's going to spend lots of weekends out here this summer. I think the home influence will be very good for her." Daisy and Tom looked at each other a moment in silence. "Is she from New York?" I asked quickly. 

"From Louisville. (Daisy replied) Our white girlhood was passed together there. Our beautiful white -- " (emphasis mine)

At which point she is abruptly cut off by Tom, who asks "Did you give Nick a little heart-to-heart talk on the veranda?" to which Daisy responds

“Did I?” She looked at me. “I can't seem to remember, but I think we talked about the Nordic race. Yes, I'm sure we did. It sort of crept up on us and first thing you know -- “

Tom interrupts her with the advice that, “You can't believe everything you hear, Nick."

What is it to which Tom Buchanan alludes and about which he seems concerned with Nick’s knowing? Certainly not his on-going affair with Myrtle Wilson, if the events of the next chapter are any indication. Nick provides another clue when he says of Tom,

...the fact that he “had some woman in New York” was really less surprising than that he had been depressed by a book. Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart.

In other words, something has happened to Tom that has fundamentally destabilized his view of the world.

"That’s the secret of Castle Rackrent…” Nick adds later. “Does the gasoline affect his (the chauffeur’s) nose?”
“I don’t think so,’ she said *innocently.*” (emphasis mine)

Why ‘innocently’? The jest about the family secret and the butler’s nose was her joke, so when Nick echoes it in his comment about Ferdie the chauffeur, we must wonder if she had forgotten it or if it had not been important enough to recall. But if this were the case, why distinguish her response as ‘innocent’ rather than, say, ‘bewildered’ by Nick’s comment? Daisy clearly knew to what Nick referred; ergo the family secret about which the family jokes is indeed a real family secret, one which, to this more worldly generation of urban sophisticates, very little serious attention is paid. Tom’s behavior is then felt more deeply because of the underlying sensitivity which Daisy and Jordan (and Nick) must share regarding such issues.

Later in the book, when Daisy sends Tom off to make drinks during Gatsby's visit on "the hottest day of the year," Daisy kisses Gatsby, and replies to Jordan's interruption that she should "...kiss Nick too." Jordan's response to this remark is "'What a low, vulgar girl!'" "'I don't care!' cried Daisy, and began to clog on the brick fireplace." Daisy recovers her decorum as the nurse brings in her daughter Pammy, whom Daisy encourages to, "'Stand up now, and say -- How-de-do.'"

Linguists who specialize in studies of the southern dialect occasionally proffer the theory that the daughters of aristocratic southern families, having been raised in the home by their African-American nannies, speak this way because of that historical influence. So Daisy might very well have been influenced in her speech patterns by her parents' domestics; on the other hand, perhaps it was not a domestic employee who had this influence on her speech and behavioral patterning, but an elderly and much-loved family figure.

Daisy avoids the sun whenever she can – remember that she and Nick stayed under the roof of the veranda earlier -- whereas Jordan Baker, a professional golfer, makes her living walking around in it; is it just Gatsby's companionship that makes her decide to ride
to New York in the coupe -- an enclosed car -- rather than Gatsby's open convertible, which Tom drives into the city? Does she tan quickly, or deeply? And why would that matter to her and not to Jordan?

Once the ill-fated party of five gets to the Plaza Hotel suite, the conversation continues, as Tom, riled by Gatsby's presence, says "...Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white."

What is it that keeps bringing Tom back to this issue? When Jordan makes a point of speaking up, as if to cool Tom off, and asserts that, "'We're all white here,...'" the careful reader must begin to wonder just why Jordan rises to the bait.

Once again, the question one must pose is just what, exactly, is Daisy's secret, and why does Jordan spring to her defense time and again with protestations of Daisy's whiteness unless, in fact, Daisy is not white, at least insofar as the ancient southern laws on blood purity are concerned?

If nothing else, Tom Buchanan's change of affection for Daisy not long after they were married might well have been something he justified by the news of her mixed-blood background, and might explain his current interest in such issues as race-purity and miscegenation within the narrative "present" of the novel.

Furthermore, it is a secret which, judging from his non-reactions, Nick is complicit in maintaining; he is, himself, Daisy's second-cousin once-removed, after all. Perhaps another word should have been emphasized in Daisy's remarks. “Our white girlhood was passed...” That word, in that context, meant then exactly what it means now. If so, when Nick and Gatsby pass a car on the Queensboro Bridge, a limousine, “driven by a white

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3 “Well past the middle of the twentieth century, some states defined Negro as someone with a single Negro great-grandparent; in three states, one great-great-grandparent was sufficient.” Elaine K. Ginsburg, from the introduction to Passing and the Fictions of Identity.
chauffeur, in which sat three modish negros… I laughed aloud…” it may be that Nick’s laughter is not merely at what he perceives as the comic irony of the scene, but because he knows something of what they are feeling.

Although not germane to this particular argument, Fitzgerald clearly had something on his mind. Dr. Kim Moreland of George Washington University kindly noted (when I presented this paper at the Sixth International F. Scott Fitzgerald Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota in September of 2002) that, in *Tender is the Night*, Nicole responds to her new-born – whom she would name Topsy – by saying, as she came out of the ether, “Get that black baby away from me.”

Furthermore, in her own novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda Fitzgerald offers some interesting comments about her heroine, Alabama Beggs. Early in the novel, commenting on her dance performance at the club, Zelda writes,

> “Alabama has inherited her mother’s wonderful coloring,’ commented the authorities, watching the gyrating figure.
> “I scrubbed my cheeks with a nail brush,” she yelled back from the stage. That was Alabama’s answer about her complexion; it was not always accurate or adequate, but that was what she said about her skin.

Perhaps more telling, in *Save Me the Waltz* is the line (in reference to Alabama) much later in the book, “By springtime, she was gladly, savagely proud of the strength of her Negroid hips, convex as boats in a wood carving.”

Returning now to the possibility of Daisy’s mixed race heritage, few scholars have bothered to examine the late 18th century novel by Irish author Maria Edgeworth, entitled *Castle Rackrent*, to which Nick earlier referred, and which we may very well assume

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4 *Tender Is the Night*
5 Fitzgerald, Zelda, *Save Me the Waltz*
Fitzgerald had read (why else the reference?). When the wealthy young heir of Castle Rackrent, Sir Kit, who has spent the last several years abroad, returns with his new bride to the family estates, the faithful caretaker, Old Thady, says:

I shall never forget the day he came home; we had waited and waited all day long, till eleven o’clock at night, and I was thinking of sending the boy to lock the gates, and giving them up for that night, when there came the carriages thundering up to the great hall-door. I got the first sight of the bride; for when the carriage door opened, just as she had her foot on the steps, I held the flame full in her face to light her, at which she shut her eyes, but I had a full view of the rest of her, and greatly shocked I was, for by that light she was little better than a blackamoor, and seemed crippled; but that was only sitting so long in the chariot.\(^7\)

What impression this could have made on a young Fitzgerald we can only guess. Old Thady goes on to inform the reader that Sir Kit’s new bride is *not* black, but that “she was a Jewish by all accounts,” a condition which, to an old Irishman of that age and era, would have been just as unthinkable as an inter-racial marriage to one of Tom Buchanan’s social standing.

The importance of any of this particular exercise in uncertainty is more readily apparent in the doubling context of her relationship with Gatsby, who, like Daisy, is certainly “passing” as something which he is not. If this reading of the text is valid, and I believe it is, at the very least, credible, then it was undoubtedly this shared, twin sense of themselves as outsiders which was responsible for much of the initial attraction between the two of them five years before, when Gatsby was a young lieutenant and Daisy an eligible debutante, just as surely as it is Tom’s dogged attempts to unmask Gatsby -- a trump card he might just as easily play on her -- that underlays Daisy’s reconciliation with her husband at the end of the novel.

Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen

\(^7\) Edgeworth, Maria, *Castle Rackrent*
table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale. He was talking intently across the table at her, and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement.

Although Nick Carraway tells us that they looked neither happy nor unhappy, the body language of the two is a clear indication that Tom has -- literally -- the upper hand. So at the end, Gatsby’s quest to pass for a member of the upper classes has failed, and Daisy’s only continues because Tom is now complicit and enables her masquerade to continue.

There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the (two of them), and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.

Indeed.
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October, 2008; “Re-Imag(in)ing the Ideal: Notes on Daisy’s Passing in The Great Gatsby” Presented at the Sixth International F. Scott Fitzgerald Conference, St. Paul, Minnesota, 2002; “The Religious Significance of the Battle Police Episode in A Farewell to Arms”. Presented at the American Literature Association Conference, Long Beach, California. Two of those plays, “Death Comes Twice” and “Re-Education of the American Proletariate” were reprised in the Milton Theater One-Act Play Competition in 2007 and 2008 respectively. (see PRIZES above.) His short-story, “Sanctuary: A Film in Black and White,” written in the form of a brief screenplay, was published by Linden Avenue Literary Journal in October 2015. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby follows Jay Gatsby, a man who orders his life around one desire: to be reunited with Daisy Buchanan, the love he lost five years earlier. Gatsby’s quest leads him from poverty to wealth, into the arms of his beloved, and eventually to death. Published in 1925, The Great Gatsby is a classic piece of American fiction. Arriving an hour before Daisy, Gatsby is nervous and, for the first time in the novel, a little unsure of himself. At the appointed time, Daisy arrives. At the house, Gatsby passes into yet a third phase: wonder at Daisy’s presence in his house. Daisy, at seeing Gatsby’s array of shirts, buries her head in them weeping at their beauty. We analyze romances between Gatsby and Daisy, Myrtle and George, and others to explain love’s role in the novel. We’re using this system since there are many editions of Gatsby, so using page numbers would only work for students with our copy of the book. To find a quotation we cite via chapter and paragraph in your book, you can either eyeball it (Paragraph 1-50: beginning of chapter; 50-100: middle of chapter; 100-on: end of chapter), or use the search function if you’re using an online or eReader version of the text. Analyzing The Great Gatsby Relationships. We will discuss the romantic pairings in the novel first through the lens of marriage. Then we will turn our attention to relationships that occur