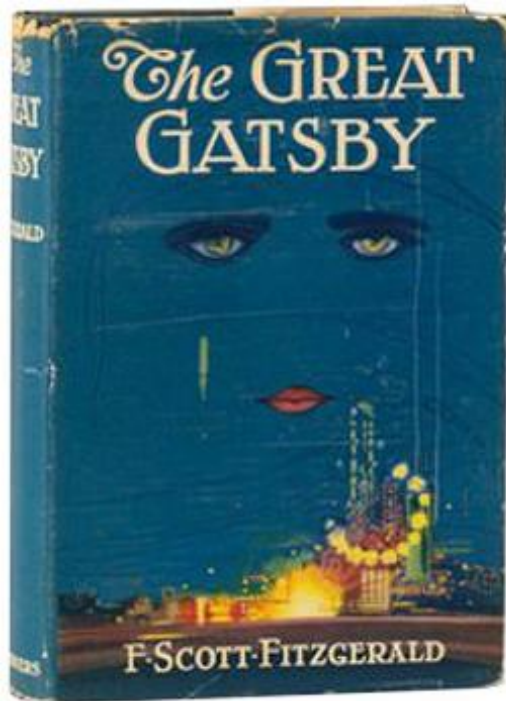


**Teaching *The Great Gatsby*:
A Common Core Close Reading Seminar
An Online Professional Development Seminar**



Sean McCann

Professor of English
Wesleyan University

National Humanities Center Fellow
2001-02

AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

GOALS

- To develop an understanding of the way FSF made use of the new techniques and styles of literary modernism (frame narrative, first-person point of view, manifest literary artifice, poetic symbolism, compression and excision) to create a compelling and evocative story.
- To consider the way FSF's used such techniques to create a rich and complex treatment of political and cultural issues (about national identity, citizenship, and selfhood) that were highly controversial in his day and remain so in ours

FROM THE FORUM

- How can we bring close reading strategies to an entire novel?
- How can we bring the context of the 1920s in our teaching of the *The Great Gatsby*?
- How might I use *The Great Gatsby* in a US history course?
- What is the relationship between Nick and Gatsby?
- Who is Nick, and why or how do we trust him? Can we?
- How, if at all, does the novel relate to Fitzgerald's own life?
- How can we handle the symbols in *The Great Gatsby*: the ash heap, the eyes of Dr. Eckleberg, the molar cufflinks?
- How was the novel received when it was published?



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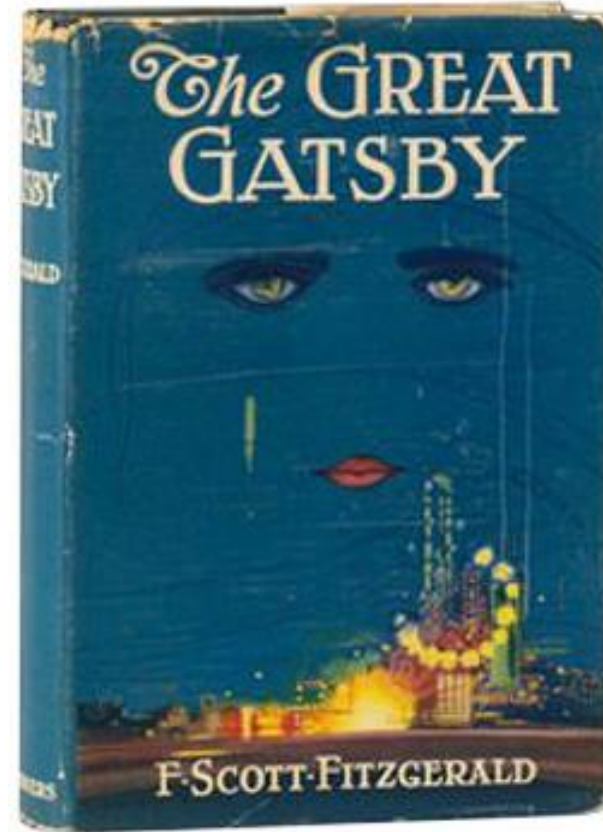
National Humanities Center Fellow
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*A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature
and Presidential Government* (2008)

*Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime
Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal
Liberalism* (2000)



F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)
in 1920



The Great Gatsby (Scribner, 1925)
Cover artist Francis Cugat

I graduated from New Haven in 1915, just a quarter century after my father, and a little later I participated in that delayed Teutonic migration known as the Great War. I enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that 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 and learn the bond business. . . . I came east, permanently, I thought, in the spring of twenty-two.

. . .

After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me . . . , distorted beyond my eye's powers of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air . . . I decided to come back home.

- What do we know about Nick Carraway?
- What kind of story does he tell about himself?

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

- How does Nick present himself?
- What is the first thing Nick tells us?

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

➤ Compare Gatsby

The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's Business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”

...

Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

➤ What happens to his father's advice?

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

[T]he intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. . . .

. . .

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. . . . [I]t was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

- How does Nick believe he differs from Gatsby?

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

“You resemble the advertisement of the man,” . . . [Daisy] went on innocently.

[Owl Eyes]: “This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages.”

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on it shelf muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

“When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn”

- What is Nick’s view of Gatsby?
- How does that view relate to his sense of his own story?

That intertwines two protagonists, two narrative arcs, two implicit views of personality, and two versions of artistry . . .

The tension between these two sides of the book arguable rooted in ambivalence FSF felt about his own character and his career.

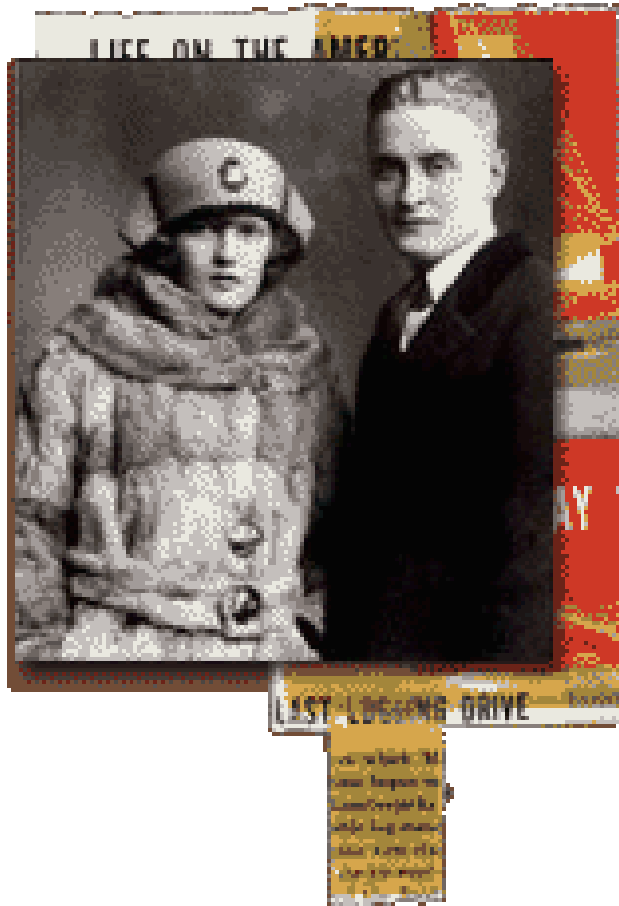
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1916



Fitzgerald wrote the lyrics for a musical musical revue—titled “The Evil Eye”—book by Edmund Wilson, that was put on by Princeton’s Triangle Club.

Because of bad grades, Fitzgerald was denied the chance to appear in the show. This photo was a publicity shot. The NYT called Fitzgerald “the most beautiful” showgirl in the revue.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

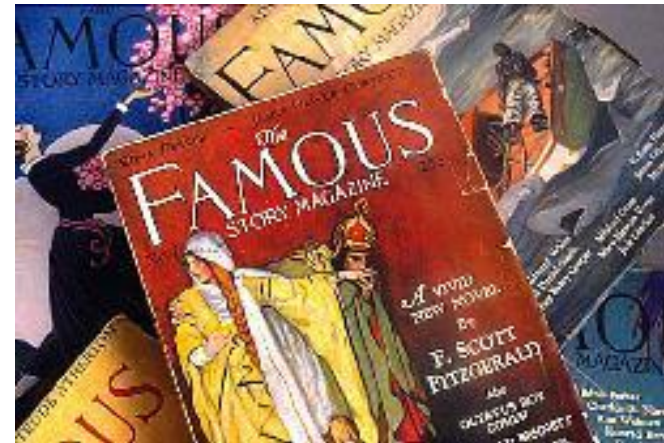
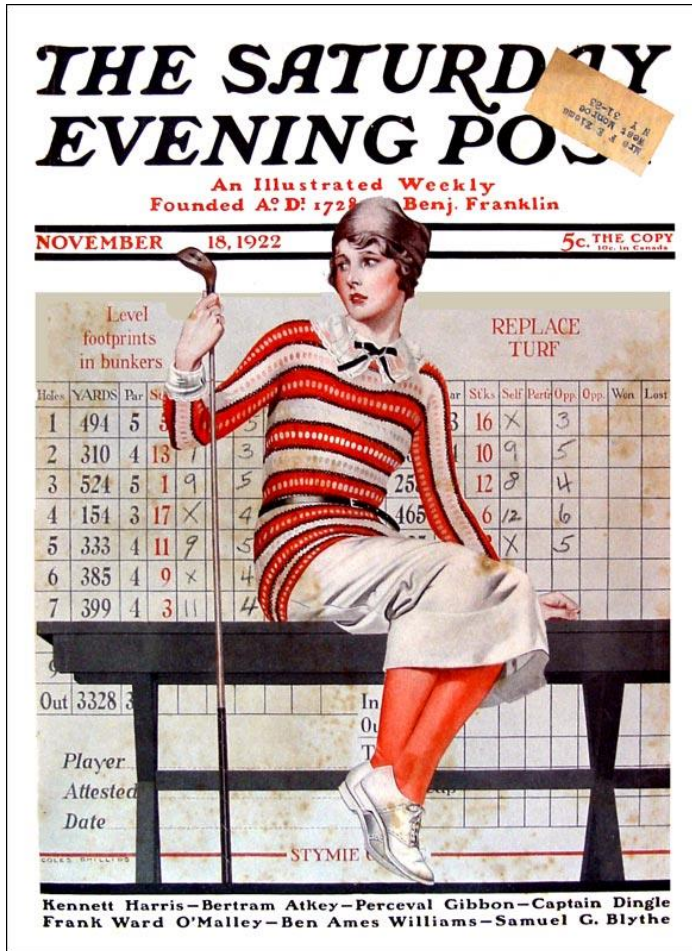


Zelda and Scott 1921



Hip flask, inscribed from Zelda to Scott

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*



Prominent “slick” magazines—
sources of Fitzgerald’s most
important revenue

Fitzgerald's most valuable patron



The Saturday Evening Post was the predominant mass market vehicle of the 1920s. It reached millions of readers every week and paid the most popular writers and artists high fees for material.

Fitzgerald published 69 stories in the magazine between 1920 and 1937. He remarked that stories he wrote for the slicks fulfilled “a perfect craving for luxury.”

Fitzgerald published 130 stories over the course of his career and earned \$241,000 for them—more than \$3 million in 2010 dollars.

Fitzgerald, “The Swimmers,” October 1929

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST October 14, 1929

THE SWIMMERS *By F. Scott Fitzgerald*

ILLUSTRATED BY G. M. WILLIAMS

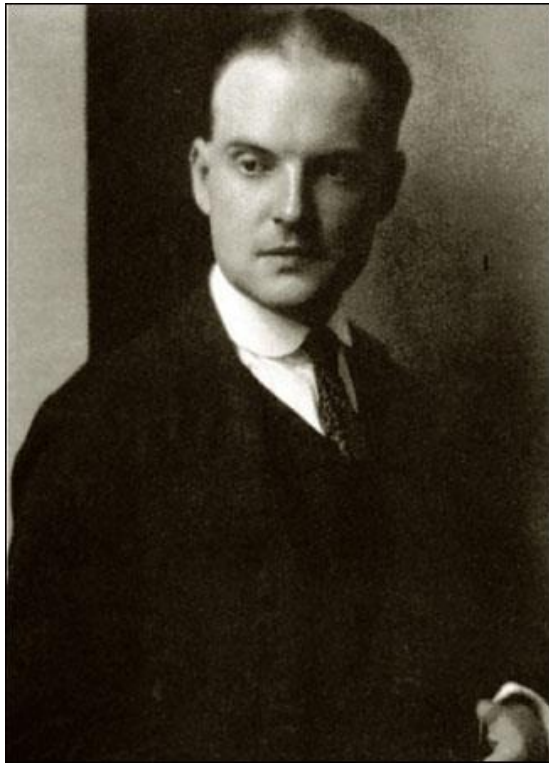


IN THE Flow details, a somewhat mass of garments—swimsuits, trunks, and towels—were piled up on the beach. The man in the suit, who was the only one of his kind on the beach, stood looking at the swimmers. He was a man of about thirty, with a serious expression. He was looking at the swimmers, who were in the water, some of them swimming, some of them wading. The man in the suit was looking at them with a certain interest. He was looking at them as if he were looking at something that was new to him. He was looking at them as if he were looking at something that was different from anything else he had ever seen. He was looking at them as if he were looking at something that was worth looking at. He was looking at them as if he were looking at something that was worth looking at.

(The rest of the story text is partially obscured by the illustration and is not fully transcribed here.)

Fitzgerald was paid up to \$4,000 for such stories – roughly \$50,000 in 2010 dollars.

FSF to Hemingway in 1929: “The Post now pays the old whore \$4,000 a screw. But now it’s because she’s mastered the 40 positions—in her youth, one was enough.”



Edmund Wilson (1895-1975), legendary critic and writer. The man who explained *The Waste Land*, and literary modernism, to America



Christian Gauss (1863-1952), Professor of Modern Languages, Princeton Univ.—the mentor FSF called at 1 a.m. to tell of Cather's approval

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

“I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe . . . Collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago.”

With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne [I]t was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

“When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.”

- How *does* Gatsby turn out “at the end”?
- And who is the “foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams”?

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

Once I wrote down on . . . a time-table . . . [dated] July 5th, 1922 . . . the grey names . . . of those who accepted Gatsby's hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him.

. . . [T]he Stonewall Jackson Abrams . . . and the Fishguards and the Ripley Snells . . . The Dancies . . . and S. B. Whitebait . . . and Maurice A. Flink and the Hammerheads and Beluga, the tobacco importer. . .

. . . [T]he Poles and the Mulreadys and Cecil Roebuck and Cecil Schoen and Gulick, the state senator, and Newton Orchid who controlled Films Par Excellence and Eckhaust and Clyde Cohen and Don S. Schwartz . . . and Arthur McCarty And the Catlips and the Bembergs and G. Earl Muldoon, brother to that Muldoon who afterwards strangled his wife. Da Fontano, the promotor . . . and James B. ("Rot-gut") Ferret . . . [who] came to gamble and when Ferret wandered into the garden it meant he was cleaned out and Associated Traction would have to fluctuate profitably the next day.



Author of, among many like others:

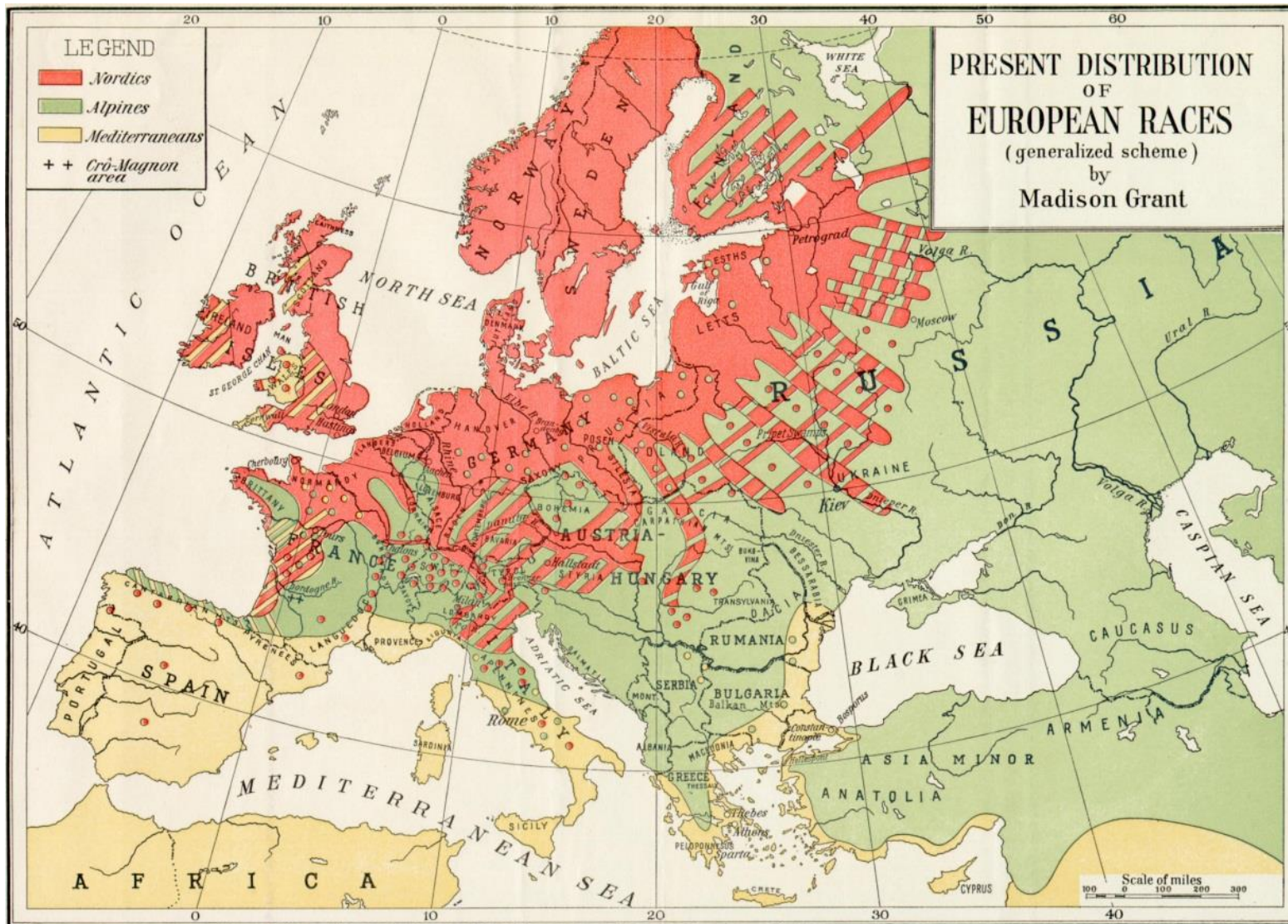
The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy (Scribner's, 1920)

The New World of Islam (Scribner's, 1921)

The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man (Scribner's, 1922).

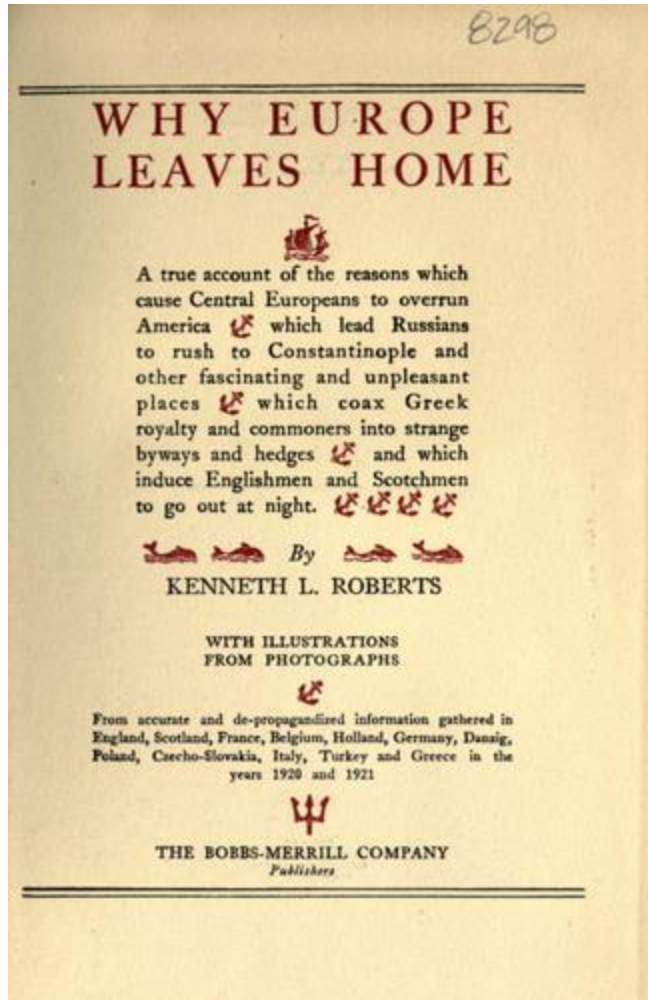
Re-forging America: The Story of Our Nationhood (Scribner's, 1927).

The American racial theorist's view of global race war, circa 1920



Map taken from Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race; or, the Racial Basis of European History* (Scribner's 1916, 1922)

Advertisement for Kenneth Roberts, *Why Europe Leaves Home* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1922)



Roberts, a popular novelist and journalist, was a correspondent for *The Saturday Evening Post* and one of the magazine's prominent voices of anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic sentiment.

“The American nation was founded and developed by the Nordic race.”

“Races can not be cross-bred without mongrelization if a few more million members of the Alpine, Mediterranean and Semitic races are poured among us, the result must inevitably be a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe.”

Cartoon supporting Immigration Restriction, Providence Evening Journal, 1921



Immigration restriction was highly popular and had little significant political opposition in the U.S. in the 1920s.

The 1924 Immigration Restriction Act—which extended and made permanent restrictions put temporarily in place in 1917 and 1921—was approved by a vote of 62-6.

The KKK marches, Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D. C., 1928



The Klan a mass movement in the 1920s—achieving by mid-decade a membership between 3 and 6 million. Elected governors in several northern and western states and mayors in several cities. Recreated in 1915 as a fraternal organization (akin to, e.g., the Elks, the Lions Club, the Shriners)—then a common feature of civic and social life. Organized as a defender of White Protestant America and expressed animosity not only to African-Americans but to immigrants, Catholics, and Jews. Claimed to oppose the moral decline threatened by the rise of mass culture (movies, magazines, radio, automobiles) and changing sexual mores and fashion styles. Supported Immigration Restriction and Prohibition and organized parades, rallies, picnics, cross-burnings, newspapers, etc.

By early 30s, scandal and disorganization reduces ranks to low thousands.

Calvin Coolidge signs the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924



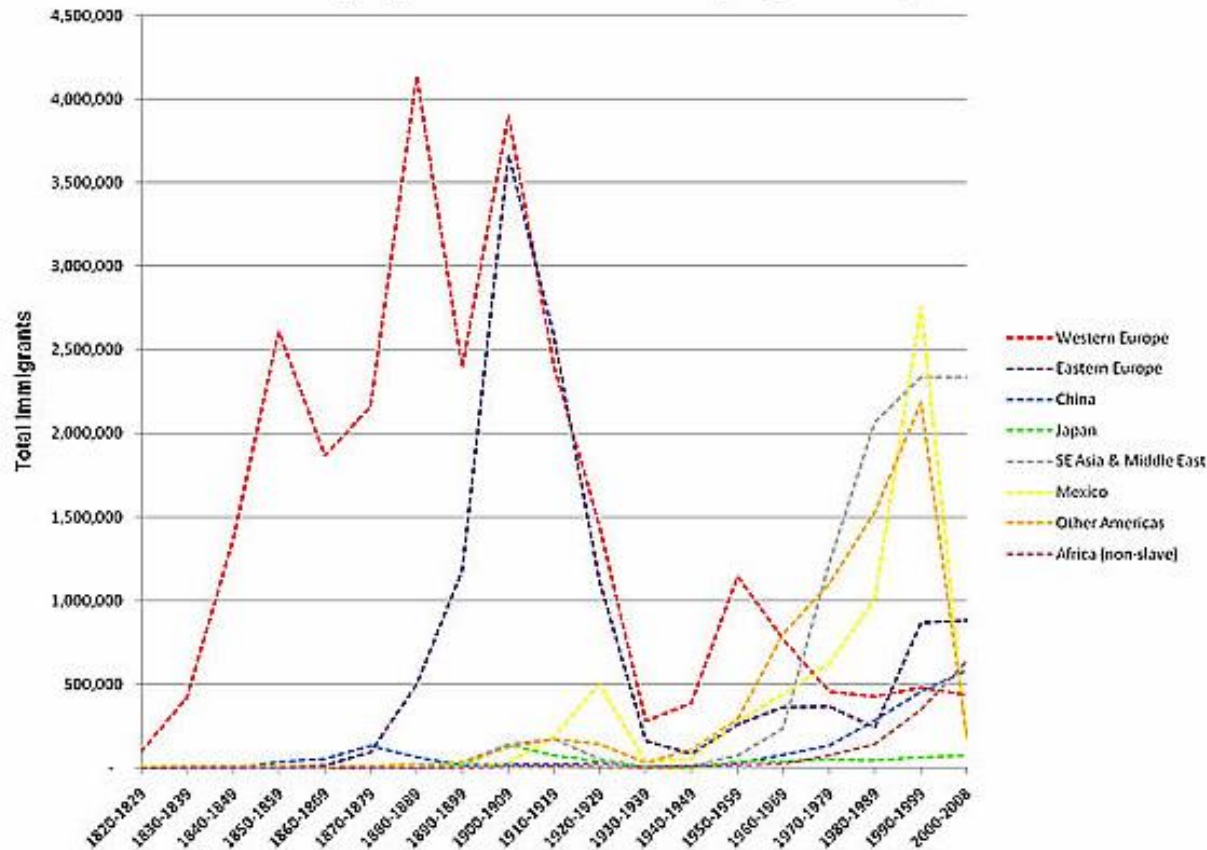
Almost completely shuts the gates to immigration until overturned by new legislation in 1965. More importantly, by setting ratios of permissible immigration according to national origin and in reference to the ethnic make-up of American population as of 1890 census, makes preserving the racial definition of American citizenship official federal policy.

Stoddard: “The cardinal point in our immigration policy should . . . be to allow no further diminution of the North European element in America's racial make-up.”

Coolidge: “America should be kept American.”

Effects of Immigration Restriction Act

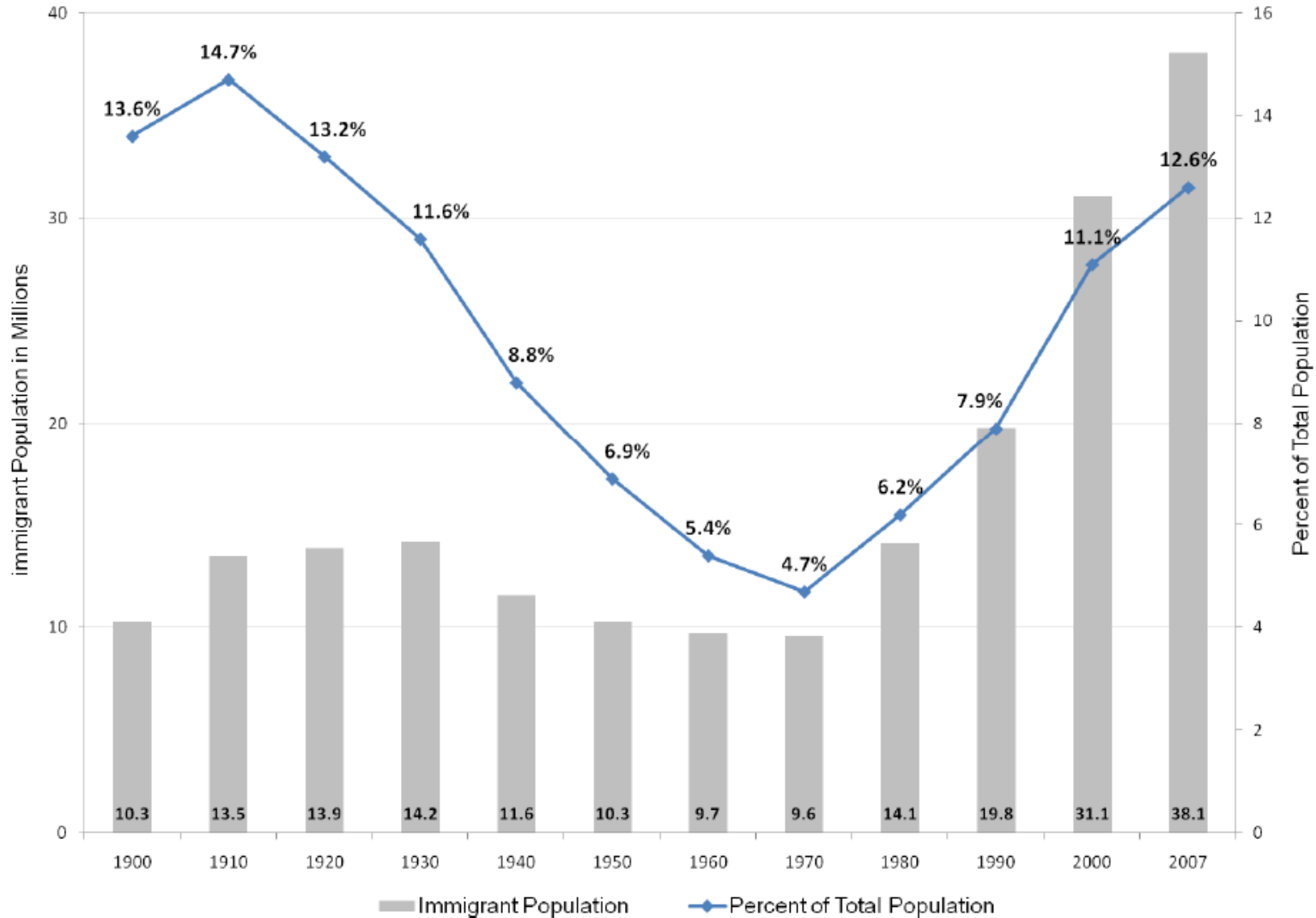
Persons Obtaining Legal U.S. Resident Status by Region of Origin, 1820-2008



“Green cards” fall off a cliff. Note in particular the spike in legal residents from Eastern Europe after 1870 and the sudden decline after 1925.

Effects of Immigration Restriction Act

Foreign Born (Immigrant) Population in the United States, 1900-2007



“God damn the continent of Europe. It is of merely antiquarian interest. . . . The negroid streak creeps northward to defile the Nordic race. Already the Italians have the souls of blackamoors. Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons, and Celts to enter. . . . It’s a shame that England and America didn’t let Germany conquer Europe. It’s the only thing that would have saved the fleet of tottering old wrecks.”

In the same letter:

“My reactions were all philistine, anti-socialistic, provincial and racially snobbish.”

Two years later, in a book review:

“No one has a greater contempt than I have for the recent hysteria about the Nordic theory.”

If you are a nativist—or, in FSF’s terms, “racially snobbish”—what are you concerned about the day after you get Immigration Restriction legislation passed?

Not the foreign-born hyphenate, but the native-born nondescript, is the real concern of the future Our alien nondescripts [are called] ‘The New Americans.’ . . . A more accurate term would be the Nothing-in-Particular. . . . They are American citizens but not American.

From, *Re-Forging America: The Story of Our Nationhood* (Scribner’s, 1927)

Tom's "impassioned gibberish"

"I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife [N]ext they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white"

Nick's lyrical vision

. . . the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world.

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

“Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge,” I thought;
“anything at all”

Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

I went over and looked at that huge, incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it Then I wandered down to the beach and sprawled out on the sand.

. . . And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once from Dutch sailor's eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder to a secret place above the trees . . . once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster as Daisy's white face come up to his own. 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. . . . At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.

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. . . . [W]hat I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.

Teaching *The Great Gatsby*

“The poor son-of-a-bitch,” . . . [Owl Eyes] said.

One of my most vivid memories is of coming back west from prep school. . . .

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us . . . a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it . . . , unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour before we melted indistinguishably into it again. . . . I am a part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name.

Otto Kahn's Oheka Castle

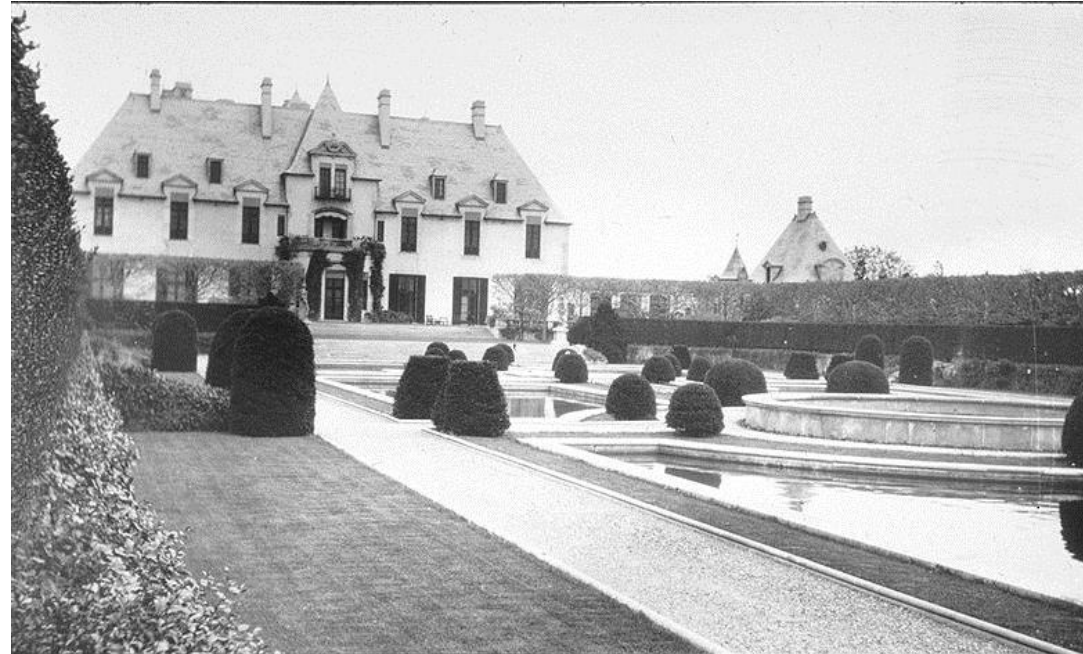
Huntington, NY

A model for Gatsby's estate.

Built by financier and philanthropist Otto Kahn between 1914-1919. Then and still the second largest private home ever constructed in the United States.

Built on an artificially constructed hill so as to overlook Cold Spring Harbor.

At the time the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory was run by Charles Davenport of Harvard, the founder of the International Society of Eugenics Organizations.



“Man Named by Caraway in Senate Attack a Real Millionaire Bootlegger”

Headline of *NY Times* story June 18, 1922 telling of Harry Brolaski “a dapper young man . . . Elected mayor of Redondo . . . Chairman of Los Angeles . . . Republican Party . . . Made friends up and down the state . . . Gained some reputation as a successful [sports] promoter . . . ‘master-mind’ of the Pacific Coast bootlegging ring.”

“Brolaski made the Volstead Act the most impotent law that Congress has ever written into the federal statutes.”

Brolaski corrupted FSF’s Princeton contemporary Loren Handley, who went on to commit suicide. Was attacked by US Senator (D-Arkansas) Thaddeus Caraway.

Final slide.

Thank you.