



The “valley of ashes,” a sprawling refuse dump located in New York City during the 1920s. The dump was the inspiration for the fictional valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*.

“Stonewall Jackson Abrams” come from East Egg, while the “Corrigans and the Kellehers and the Dewers and the Scullys and S.W. Belcher and the Smirkes and the young Quinns” come from West Egg.¹²² The first name suggests that the family has a long history of American significance, as Stonewall Jackson was a famous Civil War general. The West Egg names, by contrast, are less dignified (the names Belcher and Smirke recalling belching and smirking) and less “truly” American (Corrigan, Kelleher, Dewer, and Scully are all names that are coded as “foreign,” specifically Irish). In the early twentieth century, there was considerable prejudice against anyone, including Irish, Italians, and Germans, who immigrated to the United States but retained markers, such as last names, of their national heritage.

We see class differences manifest as well in the condescension that the “old money” East Egg neighborhood shows toward the “new money” West Egg neighborhood. For example, when Daisy attends one of Gatsby’s parties, she “was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented ‘place’ that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw

something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand.”¹²³ But class differences also appear in more dramatic ways, such as the clear visual and affective distinction between those two Egg neighborhoods and the working-class valley of ashes. While the two wealthy neighborhoods have small but significant differences, they are worlds apart from the dusty, depressing working-class area.

Fitzgerald’s interest in questions of class spring from his own personal experiences, as discussed in the biography section. He was aware from a young age that not all status was the same; that some types of money are worth more than others; and that having money and being “monied” were not necessarily the same thing. Fitzgerald was drawn to the work of economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.¹²⁴ In that study, Veblen coined three terms to help explain the attitudes of an emerging, new class of elite, wealthy individuals who, lacking the need to work, had to find other ways to pass their time. The first of these terms, “pecuniary emulation,” refers to the desperate need to exceed the socioeconomic status of others; the second, “conspicuous leisure,” refers to the habit of very publicly and obviously *not* working; and the third, and the most famous, “conspicuous consumption,” describes the need to spend that money on objects and experiences that are obvious, bold, and undeniable. We see examples of all three of these behaviors in the novel, from Tom’s deep interest in the source of Gatsby’s wealth, to Nick’s awareness of the differences between the different mansions in the neighborhoods, to Daisy’s lack of a job or anything to do, to Gatsby’s obnoxiously large yellow car. Fitzgerald was certainly not allergic to wealth himself—he liked to spend money and live lavishly—but he was also deeply interested in exploring and critiquing the behavior of a new class of wealthy Americans.

“Warm Center” vs. “Ragged Edge”: Geography and Place

The role of geography and place in the novel are linked with Fitzgerald’s interest in different forms of wealth and social status. Throughout the novel, there is a consistent formula: East always means morally inferior, while West always means morally superior. This appears in the dichotomy between East Egg and West Egg: of all the characters Nick encounters, the only one he even has a shred of respect for is Gatsby,