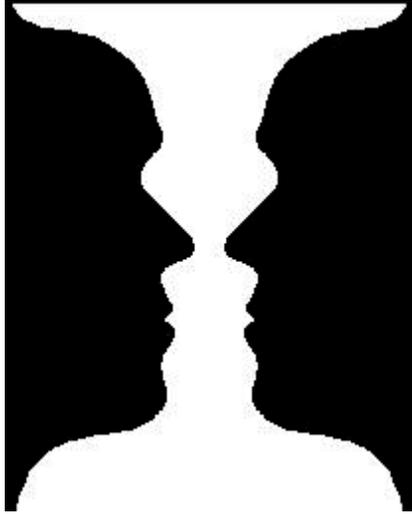


## Grasping *The Great Gatsby*: A Cognitive Approach



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In chapter two of *The Great Gatsby*, while Tom and Myrtle make love in the bedroom of the latter's apartment, Nick Carraway sits down "discreetly in the living room" and reads a chapter of Robert Keable's novel *Simon Called Peter* (1921)—or rather, fails to read it: "either it was terrible stuff or the whiskey distorted things because it didn't make any sense to me" (Fitzgerald 26). Fitzgerald here is taking a shot at a novel he thought immoral (185-6n), and associating it with the adultery, drunkenness, and violence that take place in Myrtle's apartment; but he also dramatizes a more general situation in which the act of reading fails to take place because the crucial element—making sense—is missing. Making sense of a text entails cognition—gaining knowledge of that text and its subject matter through the senses and the understanding and in combination with the pre-existing knowledge the reader brings to bear—and if the text is fictional, it also entails a simulation of the characters, situations, and actions. This simulation is both mental and physical, drawing on and related to experience in and of the actual world. It involves

sensory representations that flash or linger upon the inward eye and the other internalized senses, and the reader's body may prepare to respond to situations in fiction as if they were real, for example by tensing muscles, even though the actions that might follow in actual life would not ensue. In a cognitive perspective, there is a continuity between real-life experiences and those modelled in literary texts, though a key part of our cognition of a literary text is that it is not real. This essay aims to grasp *Gatsby* by means of three key perspectives drawn from cognitive literary criticism: figure and ground; mental spaces; and the embodied reader.

### Figure and Ground

“Figure and ground cognition,” in Peter Stockwell’s phrase (9), is a basic form of perception and knowledge and is best illustrated by those visual images in which the perceiver can, by an act of attention, reverse foreground and background, like the drawing that can be seen as either a vase or two profile faces opposite each other:

*Gatsby* provides a notable example of figure and ground cognition in its description in chapter three of how Nick, glancing back as he leaves the first *Gatsby* party he attends, sees *Gatsby* himself:

The caterwauling horns had reached a crescendo and I turned away and cut across the lawn toward home. I glanced back once. A wafer of a moon was shining over *Gatsby*’s house, making the night fine as before and surviving the laughter and the sound of his still glowing garden. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell. (Fitzgerald 46)

In this passage, elements that have been prominent earlier in the chapter—such as *Gatsby*’s garden and house and guests, the noise of car horns, the sound of revelry by night—become the ground and background against which the figure of *Gatsby* stands out.

This example might suggest a static tableau, but if we trace the figure of “Gatsby” throughout the novel, it becomes clear that figure-and-ground cognition in relation to him—as to other key elements of the text—is dynamic and changing. In this respect, we can apply Stockwell’s further notions of “trajector” and “landmark” (72). Gatsby, as a figure, is a “trajectory” who moves and changes, describes a trajectory, against a series of landmarks in the novel. He is what Stockwell calls an “attractor” (20) who draws the reader’s attention. It should be stressed that “attractors” are not necessarily characters in a fiction but words or combinations of words that may attract the reader at any given point in a text. These may, but need not be, words that describe characters.

Gatsby is initially identified as an attractor by the appearance of his name in the novel’s title. When Nick first mentions his name, in the third paragraph of the novel, he is isolated and thrust into prominence by being preceded by “Only,” used as an adverb—“Only Gatsby” (Fitzgerald 5)—and then endowed with a series of attributes that enhance his power as an attractor: he has “something gorgeous about him,” he possesses “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life,” enjoys “an extraordinary gift for hope,” exhibits an unprecedented “romantic readiness” (6)—indeed each of these terms could serve in itself as an “attractor,” and, in coalescing around “Gatsby,” they boost his “attractor” status. Gatsby then, however, disappears from the text for a time; a succession of other figures emerges. These include Nick himself; West Egg; the exterior and interior of the Buchanan house; and Tom Buchanan, first seen standing “on the front porch” (9) in a way that both anticipates and contrasts with Nick’s image in chapter three, quoted above, of Gatsby standing “on the porch” (46). In both cases, the preposition “on” indicates an immediate location and, in the contexts, a relationship of proprietorship between a person and his residence. The succession of figures also includes Daisy Buchanan; Jordan Baker; and the telephone, that “fifth guest” at the Buchanans with its “shrill metallic urgency” (16). We can trace here the way in which the figure can emerge from and change back into the ground or background—as the Buchanan house

does—and also start to chart the recurrence in the text of certain figures introduced here—not only the characters of Tom, Daisy, and Jordan, but also, for instance, the telephone, which reappears in several places, including chapter three, when the butler says to Gatsby “Philadelphia wants you on the phone, sir” (44); chapter eight, when Nick and Jordan quarrel on the telephone; and chapter nine, when Jordan, reminding Nick of that quarrel, says, “You threw me over on the telephone” (138).

Stockwell suggests that the fundamental cognitive mechanism of perceiving and grasping figure/ground relationships is the basis of “prepositional positioning” in language—that is, of where prepositions (such as “on,” “in,” “by”) are placed to indicate a relationship between two entities. To take an example from chapter two of *Gatsby*: in the clause the “little dog was sitting on the table” (Fitzgerald 31), the “dog” is the figure and “the table” the ground, and the preposition “on” specifies the respective position of one in relation to the other. The figure need not be animate, as another example shows, from chapter three of *Gatsby*: “Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York” (33). Here the crates of fruit are the figure, and the animate entity, the fruiterer, is the ground, with New York City as the background. The preposition “from” indicates the relationship between fruit and fruiterer—the latter is the provenance of the former—while the preposition “in” indicates the relationship between the fruiterer and New York City in terms of location.

In the first appearance of Myrtle Wilson in chapter two of *Gatsby*, there is a striking example of figure and ground and of the unusual use of a preposition to indicate the relationship between them. So far in that chapter, successive figures have emerged, like the Valley of Ashes, the billboard with the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, Tom Buchanan (again), George B. Wilson’s garage, Wilson himself—even though the last-named is described in largely negative terms such as “spiritless” and “anaemic” (Fitzgerald 22), he does occupy the foreground of the reader’s attention when he is first introduced. But Myrtle’s debut relegates all these preceding figures, for the moment, to ground and background status. At first,

it has the aspect of a static, if vibrant tableau: Myrtle blocks out the light from the office door, carries “her surplus flesh sensuously,” and has “an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (23). Then she smiles and moves, “walking through her husband as if he were a ghost” (23). The preposition “through” is a deviation from the norm here; “by” would be the more usual preposition. Literally, in a realistic text, it is impossible that Myrtle should walk “through” her husband (though the “ghost” simile alludes to a genre, that of the supernatural story, in which it would be possible); the preposition is to be understood metaphorically, and this linguistic and generic anomaly helps to enhance Myrtle’s status, at this point, as an attractor; her successive appearances in this chapter further augment this status (an attractor is not necessarily “attractive” in the sense of being likeable) until her trajectory is crushed by Tom’s brutal assault. From that point, Myrtle will emerge as a figure again only five times, and on three of these occasions, she will be dead. In chapter four, Nick briefly glimpses her “straining at the garage pump with panting vitality” (54) as Gatsby drives him into New York. In chapter seven, she dashes into the dusk and Michaelis and the driver of another car find her torn corpse. In the same chapter, Nick, Tom, Jordan, and the other onlookers in Wilson’s garage see her body, which “lay on a work table by the wall” (108)—here the preposition “on” assumes a ponderous force, since it no longer denotes a relationship between a living and an inanimate object; Myrtle is now, in both senses of the term, a deadweight. Finally in chapter seven, Nick confirms to Gatsby that the accident killed her and graphically elaborates that “it ripped her open” (112), though both men refer to Myrtle by pronouns (“she,” “her”) rather than her proper name.

The process of moving between figure and ground, trajectory and landmark, of which we have given key examples here, is an important part of the way in which the reader of *Gatsby*, combining input from the text with the scenarios they bring to it, constructs mental spaces.