

Excerpt from “The Colony Within: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Great Gatsby*”From *Critical Theory Today* by Lois Tyson

... [Given Nick’s self-proclaimed non-judgemental nature,] it seems especially significant that there is one area in which Nick continually makes judgements about others with no apparent consciousness of doing so: in his numerous references to the plethora of minor characters who are in some way foreign, in some way alien, to the privileged cultural group of his day, of which he is a member: white, upper-class, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, born of families who had prospered in America for several generations. Whenever Nick has cause to mention people from a different culture, he emphasizes their ethnicity as if that were their primary or only feature and thus foregrounds their “alien” quality. For example, the woman he has hired to keep his house and cook his breakfast, whom he sees every day, is referred to six different times and always by such appellations as “my Finn” (88; ch. 5) and “the Finn” (89; ch. 5). Her language consists of “[muttering] Finnish wisdom to herself over the electric stove” (8; ch. 1), and even her walk—“the Finnish tread” (89; ch. 5) is described in a way that foregrounds her ethnic difference.

Similarly, ... the youngster playing with fireworks in the Valley of Ashes is “a grey, scrawny Italian child” (30; ch. 2); and the people in the funeral procession Nick sees one day on his way to New York City have “the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe” (73; ch. 4). While Nick’s choice of words is certainly effective as colorful description, its relentless focus on the ethnicity of characters outside the

dominant culture of Jazz-Age America hints at a disquieting dimension of his attitude toward “foreigners,” a dimension that becomes clear when he speaks of Meyer Wolfshiem.

Nick introduces Wolfshiem to us as a “small flat-nosed Jew” (75; ch. 4), and we are told very little else about his appearance except for his nose. But his nose is mentioned so frequently and in such descriptive detail that Wolfshiem is reduced to the single physical feature that, as the statement just cited indicates, Nick finds the most unattractive and associates the most strongly with Wolfshiem’s ethnicity. For example, Nick says, Wolfshiem raised his “head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril” (73-74; ch. 4), and “dropp[ing] my hand [he] covered Gatsby with his expressive nose” (74; ch. 4). Apparently, all of Wolfshiem’s expressiveness, in Nick’s opinion, resides in his nose, for when Nick wants to tell us that Wolfshiem has become angry, he says, “Mr. Wolfshiem’s nose flashed at me indignantly” (75; ch. 4). When Wolfshiem is interested in something Nick has said, Nick reports, “His nostrils turned to me in an interested way” (75; ch. 4). When Wolfshiem is emotionally moved, Nick communicates this fact by saying, “[H]is tragic nose was trembling” (77; ch. 4) or “The hair in his nostrils quivered slightly” (180; ch. 9).

Nick is clearly othering Wolfshiem, as he others almost all the ethnic characters he sees. And in doing so he dehumanizes them. Othering dehumanizes because it permits one to identify oneself as “the human being” and people who are different as something “other” than human. Othering thus facilitates the demonization of people we define as different from us, as we see when Nick’s description of Wolfshiem turns that

character into a version of “the Jew as monster,” a form of othering that served Hitler well in Nazi Germany. Nick achieves this effect, apparently with no consciousness of doing anything amiss, with the only descriptions we get of Wolfshiem that do not include his nose: in Nick’s words, Wolfshiem has a “large head” (73; ch. 4), “tiny eyes” (74; ch. 4), “bulbous fingers” (179; ch. 9), and finally, “cuff buttons” made of “human molars” (77; ch. 4). Of course, Nick is demonizing Wolfshiem because this character is a criminal of rather vast proportions. But Nick foregrounds Wolfshiem’s Jewishness to such a degree that even Wolfshiem’s criminal status becomes associated with his ethnicity.

Another significant example of Nick’s othering of ethnic characters occurs when Gatsby is driving him to New York City in his enormous luxury car. Nick sees “three modish [fashionable] Negroes” in “a limousine... driven by a white chauffeur” (73; ch. 4). He describes them as “two bucks and a girl” and says, “I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (73; ch. 4). Of course Nick’s unself-conscious racism is obvious in his othering of these characters: the black men are “bucks”—animals rather than men—and the description of their wide-stretched, rolling eyes resonates strongly with racist stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as foolish, childish, overly dramatic, comic characters.

... To put the matter another way, the novel erases real African Americans, who were a very visible and important presence in New York City during the 1920s, where much of the novel is set, and substitutes in their place a comic stereotype—a colonialist other—that reinforces white superiority. This is no small move, given the historical

reality of New York City during the 1920s, which was home to the Harlem Renaissance as well as to such sites of black cultural production as The Cotton Club, where African American jazz greats attracted wealthy white patrons in droves... The novel's erasure of African Americans becomes even more ironic when we consider that *The Great Gatsby* is credited with representing the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald. Yet black Americans, who invented jazz and who were its most famous musicians, are conspicuously absent from the text.