Lives and Deaths of Gatsby: A Semantic Reading of a Key Passage in a Powerful Text

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At two o'clock Gatsby put on his bathing-suit and left word with the butler that if anyone phoned word was to be brought to him at the pool. He stopped at the garage for a pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests during the summer, and the chauffeur helped him pump it up. Then he gave instructions that the open car wasn't to be taken out under any circumstances — and this was strange, because the front right fender needed repair.

Gatsby shouldered the mattress and started for the pool. Once he stopped and shifted it a little, and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head and, in a moment, disappeared among the yellowing trees.

No telephone message arrived, but the butler went without his sleep and waited for it until four o'clock until long after there was anyone to give it to if it came. I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about … like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees.

The chauffeur — he was one of Wolfshiem's protégés — heard the shots — afterwards he could only say that he hadn't thought anything much about them. I drove from the station directly to Gatsby's house and my rushing anxiously up the front steps was the first thing that alarmed anyone. But they knew then, I firmly believe. With scarcely a word said, four of us, the chauffeur, butler, gardener, and I, hurried down to the pool.

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There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water.

It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete."

(Fitzgerald 1990 [1925]: 153–154)[1]

What is a powerful literary fiction text? The question seems to first imply that some literary texts are fictional while others are not. Does it mean that non-fictional literary texts — for example, autobiographies or authentic testimonies — are intrinsically powerful and that fictional literary texts are not? Or the other way round: that fiction texts are potentially powerful, as opposed to non-fictional ones? Or else does it mean that they exert their power differently? These questions raised by the issue at stake concern the engagement of the reader: does such a text address only one component of the reader's mental faculties (either the emotional one or the intellectual one) or more than just one (for example, both the emotional one and the intellectual one)? Does it address them throughout the reading process or just temporarily — for instance, in the reading of a powerful passage? Studies in text semantics have shown that not all literary excerpts are equally powerful; in other words, that some passages a more powerful than others (see Riemer 2016: 491–506). The subsequent hypothesis about *The Great Gatsby* relies on the idea that Gatsby's death in Chapter VIII is such a passage because it is an important stage in the building of the global meaning in the novel. Studies on real readers[2] have ventured that each reader's reading experience is shaped by more than the two capacities mentioned above. Michel Picard theorised a three-part reader divided into an unconscious component, a physical/bodily presence, and a rational self (see Picard 1986). Vincent Jouve stepped in to suggest that the

1 In the following, all quotations without any reference specified are taken from this literary excerpt.

2 I understand these as opposed to W. Iser's *implied reader*, J. Linvelt's *abstract reader*, U. Eco's *ideal reader*, and M. Riffaterre's *archreader*.

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second instance did not play any role in the reader's interaction with the text, maintaining that the description needed revising (see Jouve 1992). He came up with the same unconscious part (the passively hallucinated *lu* which is dominated by the unconscious) and the rational interpreter at each end (*lectant-interprétant*) of the spectrum but added in between the consciously identifying reader (*lisant*) and the playing/gaming reader (*lectant-jouant*) who does a lot of anticipating guess-work, relying on encyclopedic knowledge (see Jouve 1992). Jouve insists on distinguishing the part totally immersed in the unconscious from the consciously identifying self, on the one hand, and the anticipating reader from the interpreting reader[3] (the rational interpreter), on the other, while researchers studying literary reading differ in opinion regarding the way the various parts co-exist. For example, Picard suggests that they co-exist within a balance which may be disrupted when one part takes control, until the delicate equilibrium is resumed (see Picard 1986: 214). Belgian researcher Jean-Louis Dufays does not mention swinging movements but sees a continuum between those components: a text perused from beginning to end may thus engage those various parts simultaneously or successively (see Dufays 2019: 183–191). In other words, although readers may be split into novice vs. expert groups, each reader can himself be divided into different roles and various types of engagement, which are not mutually exclusive.

What I propose to do in the following development is a semantic reading of a crucial passage which can be construed as a local transformation of the global meaning of Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. While a protagonist's death most certainly engages the reader's emotional part, like any life/death issue, I will submit an interpretation relating global and local levels based on semantic building.[4]

When the narrator in *The Great Gatsby* starts relating what happened during the summer of 1922 (in Chapter I), for most readers a tension between mixed feelings of fascination and disgust towards the eponymous protagonist builds up right away. This tension then goes back and forth between various

3 The interpreting reader is aware of belonging to a community of commentators, whom he has read and whom he quotes to support his own arguments, and his intellectual constructs rely on ethically explicit tools and procedures.

4 'Semantic building' implies that meaning is not always already found in the text but needs an interpreter interacting with the text and using it both as the object of interpretation and the parameter of the interpretation (e.g. using the context to neutralise traits or actualise others).

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peaks until the murder of the ironically "great" Gatsby, the scapegoat, in the penultimate chapter. Nick Carraway, the narrator, is Gatsby's neighbour and they first have a reserved and cordial relationship. After Gatsby finds out that Nick is his former sweetheart's cousin, they begin spending more time together. Being instrumental in helping facilitate Gatsby's mad dream to rekindle his love affair, Nick eventually appears more or less as the only one who cares about Gatsby after his death. This death is given in the extract under scrutiny[5], in chapter VIII, occurring after Myrtle Wilson has been knocked down by Gatsby's speeding yellow car driven by Daisy, his eternal princess. The runaway driver's shirking of responsibility gives Daisy's husband — Tom Buchanan, incidentally Myrtle's lover — an opportunity to get rid of his own wife's wooer by giving away his rival's name to the bereaved Wilson[6]. The created quid pro quo with the ultimate goal of vengeance prepares either a tragic scene or a crime scene, resting on the conspiracy of two offended husbands. And indeed, the story seems to unfold as both a tragedy and a piece of crime fiction; yet, the codes of tragedy and crime fiction are simultaneously undercut, as we are going to 'see'.

In the chosen extract from Chapter VIII, the codes of the detective story are both established and undermined. Established by precise chronological facts and the revelation of the criminal's name at the end; and undermined by blurring proleptic announcements such as "until long after there was anyone to give it to" (§ 3) or "afterwards he could only say that he hadn't thought anything much about them" (§ 4). Not only is time logic disturbed but causal logic is also disrupted by contradictions ("but he shook his head" [§ 2], "but the butler went without his sleep" [§ 3]); and so are the characters' identities.

Part of the ambiguity found in the passage can be attributed to narrator Nick Carraway, who — being the retrospective enunciator — is supposed to know, whereas as a character, he could not predict all the developments. This duality is echoed in two different sorts of paragraphs: narrative, empirical paragraphs, based on facts and experience (§ 1, 2, 4, 6, sentence 1 in § 3) vs. descriptive, lyrical paragraphs ('transcendent realism' § 3, 5). Paragraph 4

5 The passage is signalled in most editions as framed by blanks or typographical signs. The previous segments deal with Wilson's preparations and movements. The chosen piece ends on movement as well. Moving is often a convenient way to separate sequences, as in drama.

6 "'What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's'" (Fitzgerald 1990 [1925]: 169).

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thus appears as a pivotal moment in the reading experience because in the second series, enunciation markers[7] which are first conspicuous ("*I* have an idea" [§ 3]) next become invisible (§ 5). In other words, some kind of change must have taken place in between.

What is related in paragraph 4 is obviously a focal point reshuffling the previous elements, however crisis-marked they may have been already. Indeed paragraph 4 is the place of Gatsby's empirical death, which is both suggested by facts ("heard the shots") but left off stage by that conspicuous synecdoche. However, paragraph 3 has prepared us for Gatsby's death in more ways than just one:

> No telephone message arrived, but the butler went without his sleep and waited for it until four o'clock until long after there was anyone to give it to if it came. I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees (§ 3).

In this part Wilson has become a ghost, a puppet manipulated by Tom Buchanan and he dies to avenge Myrtle, and — unwittingly — Daisy's husband, by proxy, just as Gatsby pays "a high price" (§ 3) instead of Daisy. The swapping of roles and identities contributes to the general confusion. Notably, identities seem to melt and merge: they dissolve when Gatsby becomes "anyone to give it to" (in the proleptic announcement "until long after there was..." [§ 3]) just as Daisy had previously become anyone (in "anyone phoned" in § 1); Wilson is not immune to the dissolution of identity as he grows into

7 Enunciative linguistics is a linguistic theory based on an utterer-centered approach to discourse/language use/speech since its main premise is that "the situation from which someone is speaking" (the situation of uttering) plays a key role as it "provid[es] one with a central anchoring point around which all locations ('repérages') evolve" (Girard-Gillet/Chauvin 2015: §2). The notion of *enunciation* can thus be used to refer to the enunciative markers in a text, that is to say, the linguistic components which determine the situation of uttering.

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"that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees"; identities even appear to merge, as narrator Nick resorts to epistemic modality to identify with Gatsby: "*I have an idea that* Gatsby himself didn't believe…, and *perhaps* he no longer cared. If that was true he *must* have felt that… He *must* have looked up…" (§ 3, emphasis added). This identification process contributes to portraying Gatsby as a dweller from "the old warm world" completely at odds with "[a] new world" (§ 3). The defamiliarisation of the world is conveyed by Ø determiner, as in "frightening leaves" or "poor ghosts", and by the indefinite article "A", as in "[a] new world" (vs. the definite article THE, as in "the old warm world"), as well as by such adjectives as "unfamiliar", "frightening." and "grotesque" (§ 3).

In other words, Gatsby's death seems to have happened before he was even shot down, when he left the romantic world for a dysphoric, modern world: "he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever" (Chapter 8: 146). And this, too, contributes to the attenuation of the violent shooting. Moreover, cessative semantic traits have been scattered over the text, starting with "yellowing" (§ 2), which suggests autumn, a season poetically associated with the beginning of the end, and reminding us that summer is connected with life ("life was beginning over again with the summer" [Chapter I: 10]).[8]

This emphasis on the "new world", which ushers in the murderer, can be used as an instruction to examine the similarities between the human actor and the transcendent ones. Indeed, the "new world" (§ 3), 'Wilson' and 'Death' seem to share the same cluster of semantic traits: all three are material, unreal and amorphous, as summarized in table 1.

As evidenced in this table, unlike the new world and the murderer, death is neither described, nor mentioned. The euphemising strategy concerning death is continued and amplified in paragraph 5:

> There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch

8 Like parties and entertainment in paragraph 1 ("amused"). To complete the poetic use of seasons, Buchanan met Daisy in spring 1919 and married her in June, while Gatsby first kissed Daisy in autumn (Chapter VI), which does not bode well, symbolically.

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of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water. (§ 5)

Table 1:

	/material/	**/unreal/**	**/amorphous/**
new world, on the //cosmic// isotopy	sky, leaves, rose, sunlight, grass, trees…	unfamiliar, without being real, ghosts, dreams,	amorphous (trees)
Wilson, on the //human// isotopy	ashen	fantastic	figure
Death, on the //metaphysical// isotopy	shots	?	?

Significantly, shapes, weight and movements are reduced, played down, erased by modifiers, namely the adjectives and adverbs listed in table 2:

Table 2:

modifier	**modified term**
faint	movement
barely	perceptible
little	ripples
shadows	waves
irregularly	moved
small	gust
scarcely	corrugated
enough	disturb
accidental	course
accidental	burden
slowly	revolved

'Death', the metaphysical actor, is thus made as unreal and as amorphous as the murderer. Causal logic is deleted; only consequences ("tracing" [§ 5]) are left, but minimally so. Gatsby's body and blood vanish in metonymy or

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synecdoche ("the *laden* mattress", "a thin *red* circle", [§ 5, emphasis added]). The murder — resulting in the burden of the corpse — becomes a mere accident, which is itself eclipsed by minimum morphemic change ("accident*al*", [§ 5, emphasis added]). Moreover, "accidental" resumes "fortuitously" (at the end of § 3), converting tragedy — that which concerns essence — into accident — that which does not threaten essence. More than ever, the word *euphemism* takes on its meaning from its Greek etymology — *euphemein*: to adore in silence.

So, what is it which is euphemised? Gatsby's life, which slowly dies down? Or Gatsby's death, which is denied? Both, of course. Indeed, this powerful passage shifts the protagonist from life-in-death (a non-life, without Daisy) to death, and finally to his non-death. The semantic features /vertical/ and /dynamic/ first attributed to Gatsby in paragraph 1 (when seen standing and moving) have been implicitly transferred to the fantastic figure gliding through in paragraph 3 and implicitly replaced with /horizontal/ and /static/ by the "laden mattress" in paragraph 5. However, in paragraph 6, Wilson's body — even for him, the term 'corpse' is carefully avoided and replaced by 'body' — is found in the grass, which owes him to inherit /horizontal/ and /static/. By contrast, the beginning of paragraph 6 induces some kind of hallucination as one reads "It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that […]" (§ 6) and we almost hear or see Gatsby walking to the house with the others (a collective WE in which Nick merges). The protagonist is raised from the dead.

Besides this exchange of semantic features, the two characters are connected with different cosmic elements: the "grass" and the "holocaust" link Wilson to chthonian elements (earth and fire, § 6); while the uranic water and wind are ascribed to Gatsby, with the "small gust of wind […] scarcely corrugat[ing] the surface" (§ 5) suggesting a dying soul animating the surface of the water.[9] This integration to a higher transcendent realm, the cosmic one, is a denial of death preparing readers for the final metamorphosis of Gatsby. The ending of the novel actually promotes Gatsby as the embodiment of the American Dream through the mythological figure of the Dutch sailor who first set foot on the green island: "as the moon rose higher the inessential houses

9 As early as Chapter I Daisy's husband kills the wind, and all the rest collapses: "Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor" (Fitzgerald 1990 [1925]: 13).

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began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes […]" (Fitzgerald 1990 [1925]: 171).

The speaker's identification with the deceased and the latter's integration to a transcendent realm in Chapter VIII have paved the way for Gatsby's final passage to the land of mythology.

Text semantics has described interpretation as reader-perception of semantic clusters which lose or drop traits as the reading process develops. Reading has been compared indeed to the building of forms standing out against backgrounds, the way cognitive psychology depicted perception of mental images. However helpful this comparison may be, it does not go as far as to assimilate perception of images to perception of semantic traits, or the other way round, since one semiotic system cannot be reduced to another. Yet, I managed to build a cluster of (semantic) traits including /material//, /unreal/, and /amorphous/ that corresponds to the "new world", as well as to Wilson and to death. After characterising the treatment given to the predators, the next step was to follow the victim's changing fate. The cluster attached to Gatsby first includes /vertical/ and /dynamic/, which are then swapped with their antonyms /horizontal/ and /static/, and which finally reverts to the protagonist through the reading hallucination mentioned above. This led me to gather a number of elements in my reading of the chosen excerpt. First, the speaker identifies with the deceased, as he will again below ("I began to have a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all" (Fitzgerald (1925) 1990: 157), declares the narrator after all close relations retreat into diffident shyness. Secondly, he refers to Providence. Thirdly, he blames close relations for their negligence ("The chauffeur — he was one of Wolfshiem's protégés — heard the shots — afterwards he could only say that he hadn't thought anything much about them." [§ 4]).These features are not unlike some of the norms found in elegies. Yet in the excerpt under study, I have emphasised the specific transformation applied to these generic norms which is added to the general linguistic use and to the author's stylistic tour de force. My final hypothesis thus concerns the whole novel as an elegy — or an elegiac mode, to use Alastair Fowler's terminology (see Fowler 1981) — and leads me to reconsider this passage as powerful because it is a local transformation of the global meaning. One of the principles of hermeneutics, taken up by Schleiermacher, is the determination of local nodes by the global textual project. So, I searched the broader context of the novel for what may have determined this crucial passage, and I found the following: a deploration of

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loss[10], a eulogy[11]; the blaming of everything and everyone that harms Gatsby[12] and of close relations[13]: Wolfsheim is dishonest[14]; Klipspringer is a parasite; Jordan Baker is a liar; the servants are negligent; the Buchanans are "careless people" (ibid.: 170)[15]; some kind of consoling access to transcendence (see the closing chapter). This cannot fail to remind us of the elegies written by Donne[16], Tennyson, Auden and Rilke (see Abrams 1981: 46–48).

To conclude on the question as to which linguistic phenomena are potentially responsible for readers' reactions, it turns out that a powerful reading of a powerful text combines thematic components, narrative elements (for example, the function 'kill', or the process 'die'), linguistic modalities (especially those markers revealing the enunciative origin of utterances), and semantic linear arrangements (for example, the semantic process through which the

10 "After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me" (Fitzgerald (1925) 1990: 167), "the party was over" (ibid.: 171)

11 "No – Gatsby turned out all right at the end" (ibid.: 8)

12 "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" (ibid.). The opposition between the earth and the wind is already found in the contrast between 'dust'/'(short)-winded'.

13 "They're a rotten crowd" (ibid.: 146). In older elegies nymphs and protecting chaperons were blamed for their negligence.

14 "'When a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it in any way. I keep out.'" says Wolfshiem (ibid.: 163).

15 "It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy--they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . ." (ibid.: 170).

16 Thanks to Michael Toolan for asking about "the leg of transit" and suggesting that the compass image was once used by John Donne in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1611) to "denote the lovers, unbreachably linked even if one of the pair travelled far away." In March 1925, Maxwell Perkins, who was working with Charles Scribners' Sons and doing proof-reading of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Wolfe, wrote to Fitzgerald: "The other change was where in describing the dead Gatsby in the swimming pool, you speak of the "leg of transept." I ought to have caught this on the galleys. The transept is the cross formation in a church and surely you could not figuratively have referred to this. I think you must have been thinking of a transit, which is an engineer's instrument. It is really not like compasses, for it rests upon a tripod, but I think the use of the word transit would be psychologically correct in giving the impression of the circle being drawn." Fitzgerald's answer came too late and reveals some kind of awkward misunderstanding: "Transit will do fine though of course I really meant compass" (Bruccoli 1991: 40–59).

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transcendent state reached by Gatsby allows for the narrator's, and perhaps the reader's, consolation). I hypothesise that each reader's unconscious part is engaged by Gatsby's unfair death. However, while the playing/gaming reader can elaborate on what is going to happen next — to Daisy, the reckless driver, to Nick, the divided friend, to Tom, Daisy's manipulating husband, etc. — the intellectual part in the reader is faced with a complex passage, where the mourning narrator transforms Gatsby's former image through euphemising strategies and his access to another realm. It can thus be ventured that cruel, brutal death is denied, diluted, and done away with while Gatsby's soul is blown in the wind. The specific, powerful configuration found in the passage under scrutiny has, hopefully, been described as a local transformation of the global elegiac meaning of the novel.

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