We Need to Talk About Nick:

Sexual Divergence, Characterization and the Hardcover Closet in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

Vi måste prata om Nick:
Sexuell avvikelse, karaktärisering och den inbundna garderoben i F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract.

Criticism of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s, The Great Gatsby (1925) is often focused around its already evident focal points, such as its critique of capitalism, excess and greed. Therefore, this essay focuses on and discusses instances in The Great Gatsby of sexual divergence and homoeroticism. It is written with the purpose of giving the novel an alternative reading and perspective, coupled with expressing the need to look beyond a surface-level analysis of the novel. This is primarily accomplished by analyzing and highlighting the novel's narrator and central character, Nick Carraway. While this kind of reading is not as common as other readings of The Great Gatsby, it is however not original. By using other queer readings and criticisms I have found that Nick Carraway’s repressed and hidden sexual ambiguity is exposed in, as well as informed by, his homosocial interactions, his move to New York and his relationships throughout the novel, especially his relationship to Jay Gatsby. What this essay does, that many other queer readings neglect, is expressing the need to not label the characters with binary forms of sexuality, even though such forms are implied. This essay also highlights how Fitzgerald’s language sometimes suggests sexual divergence and discusses the importance of exploring these instances.
Although not his only novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) has come to be seen as his magnum opus. The novel is not only synonymous with Fitzgerald's name, it is also synonymous with literature itself, much like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). In other words, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel with which many people, regardless of whether or not they have read it, are at least passingly familiar. Perhaps it is not providence alone that made *The Great Gatsby* a contemporary classic; Fitzgerald admitted to drawing inspiration from such literary titans as the above mentioned Joyce as well as Joseph Conrad (Hoffman, 6 – 7). The novel has, since its release, become canonized in culture where it remains relevant and often read more than ninety years after its release. Why it is still read becomes clear when reading the novel. Using a poetic yet accessible language, and a narrative written in retrospect by its narrator, Fitzgerald presents a relatively contained and linear story (with occasional flashbacks) concerning several different subject matters. Therefore, after finishing the novel, one could say that it is a story about love, while also a story about greed, capitalism, friendship, post-war Americana, history, family and loneliness. Because of this, *The Great Gatsby* is especially approachable for academic discourse and analysis. Fitzgerald's style of prose also often deals with matters left unsaid, either explicitly so by the character (highlighted by an ellipsis) or omitted by Fitzgerald himself. However, academic discourse and analysis regarding the novel tends to lean towards what I consider a surface level analysis. This means that the focal point of analysis lands on matters Fitzgerald already explored or did not omit. These are matters such as his searing critique of capitalism and materialism, the inherently impossible nature of the American dream and his almost moralistically alarmist view on relationships. Although nothing is wrong with this kind of analysis, it becomes problematic because not only does it neglect important aspects of the novel, but it also, by extension, distracts from other important readings of the novel.

It needs to be acknowledged that a queer reading of *The Great Gatsby* is not new or original. This essay leans on similar readings to varying lengths of analysis, and owes a debt to Lois Tyson, whose essay “Will the Real Nick Carraway Please Come Out?” carefully catalogues gay signs throughout the novel. Instead of creating an almost lexical inventory of all signs pointing to sexual ambiguity in *The Great Gatsby* (as Tyson does) this essay will focus its in-depth analysis on Nick Carraway as exclusively as possible. Nor will the essay, as mentioned previously, focus on labeling the characters with a binary form of sexuality, which other queer critics often do. This is an important distinction since a queer reading of *The Great Gatsby* with the intention of showcasing a character's homosexuality will differ from one where the focus is not homosexuality, but rather the divergence from heterosexuality.

The matters that go neglected when focusing on a surface-level analysis of *The Great Gatsby* are the subtextual references and implications of both race and sexuality, of which I will
focus on the subject of sexuality. As pioneer of queer theory Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick said of the importance of queer theory, “you can't understand relations between men and women unless you understand the relationship between people of the same gender, including the possibility of a sexual relationship between them” (The New York Times, 1998). With this in mind, this essay will focus on analyzing homoeroticism and sexual divergence (meaning sexuality which diverges from a heterocentric norm), specifically as depicted in the character of Nick Carraway. Drawing on queer literary theory, I will highlight and explore several instances from the novel where sexual divergence may be suggested and implied, especially when concerning Nick's past, his experiences with homosocial interactions, the relevance of New York, his reliability as narrator and finally the characterization of his attraction to Jay Gatsby and Jordan Baker. The analysis is partially inspired and informed by American gay rights activist and author Vito Russo's theory, known as the Celluloid Closet. The Celluloid Closet, as explained by Danish academic Henning Bech, refers to “films in which 'gay characters' are hidden away like dirty secrets and never allowed to come out with their life or dignity intact” (65). Furthermore, Bech continues by stating that “there isn't always a homosexual man locked up in the film closet, rather an ever-present absent homosexuality among 'non-homosexual' men” and concludes that this theoretical closet not only traps characters, but audiences as well (65). In other words, the audience, or reader, in this case, will assume that a character is heterosexual unless otherwise expressly stated. Building on this, I would like to introduce a rebranded concept which relates to The Great Gatsby, tentatively called, because of the literary medium, the Hardcover Closet. The function of this is, as expressed above, to explore and detail instances where Fitzgerald's style of prose leaves the sexual identity of his characters open for interpretation. Without intention, or desire, to ascribe a certain binary sexuality to a character, I will nonetheless analyze and discuss how Fitzgerald's portrayal of Nick suggests that he has a sexual behavior that diverges from heterosexuality. I will avoid any classification because, as expressed in the essay Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, “It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes” (33). I will also avoid binary classification strictly out of a lack of necessity. The purpose of this essay is not to out Nick Carraway, but rather to give the novel, and the character, a nuanced and alternative reading. This line of thinking is inspired by Judith Butler's thoughts concerning queer theory: “Those of us who have questioned the presentist assumptions in contemporary identity categories are, therefore, sometimes charged with depoliticizing theory” (227). This means that giving Nick the label of homosexual would be, in a sense, the same as utterly glossing over his sexual characterization altogether. Therefore, what Nick's sexuality is will not be relevant, but highlighting that he does deviate from heteronormativity will be. By noticing these passages and interactions, we may keep away from locking Nick, and ourselves, into the hardcover
Not much is known about Nick's life prior to the events in the novel, even though he is the narrator. In what seems to be a summary of his life so-far, Nick explains that his family comes from the Midwest, that he can trace his family's lineage back to England, that he has graduated from the same college as his father, and that his family reluctantly sponsored his move to the east coast where he wanted to learn the “bond business” (8 – 9). From this brief summary we can extract that Nick comes from a family steeped in tradition. He even mentions that his father operates the hardware store opened by his grandfather during the American civil war (8). But it seems that the life chosen by his elders is not suitable for Nick. His disillusionment with the Midwest of his childhood begins when he returns from the first World War, and describes it as: “Instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe” (9: c.f. Tyson, 348). This is certainly not the description of home one would expect from someone returning from war, but Nick does describe himself as feeling “restless” (9) in the Midwest. A reason as to perhaps why Nick feels this way can be found in Henning Bech's book *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity* (1987). Bech argues that Western society's view on homosexuality is that of binary identities (something you either *are or are not*) and that heterosexuals engaging in homosexual acts only occur “because they are not in full possession of their faculties [...] or because they are deprived of their full freedom of movement (as being put in prison or in military camps)” (17 – 18). Although Nick was never put in a military camp, joining the army and being shipped out to war would undeniably rob him of his *full freedom of movement*. Understood in another way, Nick would have been forced into a massive military homosocial situation. Not only that, but prior to joining the military, Nick had just finished college. Following Bech's argument, we understand that being in college is not the same as being imprisoned or drafted into the army, but Bech’s argument is about the effects of forced homosocial interaction, which college, in the early twentieth century, undeniably was. Regardless of how you frame it, according to Bech, the point is that – justified or not – homosexuality (and homosexual acts) occurs among men in isolated groups forced to socialize and live with one another. This point is echoed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who argues that the United States military forces men into “intimate male bonding” while, at the same time, violently rejecting notions of homosexuality within their own ranks, in a manner much more intense than in civilian life (304). Elaborating on what that would mean for Nick and other men is a dismal proposition. The army would create a temporarily isolating sphere where intimacy, both physical and emotional (as in trust and communication) would be encouraged, while at the same time disallowing any romantic version of the same physicality and
emotion. As Tyson comments regarding Nick's military background, “Nick fits the profile of thousands of young men who discovered their gay orientation during World War I” (347). Compressed into Nick that would mean knowing men closely but not allowing himself to act on any desires that might occur because of this intimacy, causing, I will argue later, Nick to repress his own impulses and desires.

Furthermore, while in college, Nick was “unjustly accused of being a politician, because [he] was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” (7). This is because, as he himself says, “I'm inclined to reserve all judgment” (7) and that the “abnormal mind” is attracted to this quality (c.f. Tyson, 350). In Fitzgerald's style of omission, we never learn what “wild” indicates or why – aside from being supposedly open-minded – Nick was privy to these confessions. Instead, however, we are informed that Nick reacted to being put in the position of a politician by “feigning sleep, preoccupation or a hostile levity” to avoid “intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions” (7). What we understand, on the surface, is that Nick's position as the confidant of his peers is not always welcomed. It is his wording that becomes interesting, if we scrutinize the final part of the statement; “marred by obvious suppressions”. Again, Fitzgerald's omissions do not offer the context of what is being suppressed. Many things could be suppressed, of course, but one commonly held notion is that of one's sexuality being suppressed. This is common (and was, even more so, in the 1920's) among homosexuals whose sexuality has been stigmatized by society in general. Society's suppression of homosexuality causes homosexuals to repress their own identity, and their natural need for homosexual expression. In fact, Freudian psychologist Wilhelm Stekel wrote in his 1922 essay *Bi-Sexual Love* that “the homosexual originally is not exclusively directed towards the same sex [...] But he represses his heterosexuality just as the heterosexual must repress his homosexuality” (29). This gives us some clue as to how sexuality deviating from the norm was considered when Fitzgerald was writing *The Great Gatsby*. It should be submitted that this suppression of homosexuality could be what Nick is referring to, as much as it could be anything else. But Nick does, at one point, openly speak about a kind of cautionary approach towards his emotions which mirrors the act of repression: “I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires” (59). Furthermore, returning to Bech, he states: “If indeed homosexuality is everywhere, it is there, as we have seen, mostly as that which isn't there, that which is known and not known, that which one wishes and will not tolerate. Thus, it is present only insofar as its presence can be denied” (43). This is what, it should be argued, is happening in *The Great Gatsby*; situations are presented where sexual ambiguity is suggested but not entertained. Within these mostly confined homosocial situations – college and the army – sexual ambiguity is placed as something which is known and unknown. It is therefore not a stretch to argue that, having returned
from situations where he would have been free to circumstantially explore his sexuality, Nick feels trapped in his old Midwest traditions.

This bring us to the relevance of New York. As mentioned previously, Nick's family shows a certain skepticism towards him moving east. The family is indeed also described by Nick as a "clan" (8), so departure from the trail blazed by his forerunners would surely cause some anxiety within the family, no matter where that departure was heading. However, New York is special. It is certainly not uncommon for geographically larger, and more socially progressive, cities to be depicted and understood as amoral. Especially when they are compared to rural traditions. Aside from Nick physically leaving the clan of his childhood, although it is impossible to know for certain, it could be argued that this was a concern for his family; their boy being corrupted by the big city. A certain anxiety towards New York, of course, not being morally justifiable is nonetheless historically verifiable. The book *Gay Life & Culture: A World History* states that New York was one of the first American cities to abolish the death penalty for sodomy (152) as well as having extensive homosexual subcultures at the end of the nineteenth century (163). The book also states that at the beginning of the 1920s, Greenwich Village and Harlem had a welcoming reputation towards same-sex couples (245). It needs to be acknowledged that *The Great Gatsby* does not suggest that the sexually progressive nature of New York at the time was a reason for Nick's move. Aside from his willingness to learn a trade, however, Nick does hint towards the possibility of more homosocial interactions by stating: “Everybody I knew was in the bond business, so I supposed it could support one more single man” (9). Moreover, Maggie Gordon Froelich points towards the passage in the novel where Nick is introduced to Gatsby's business partner, Wolfsheim (67 – 71) as more evidence concerning the importance of New York. She writes:

The 'well-fanned Forty-second Street cellar' in which Nick meets Wolfsheim, a man Gatsby calls a 'denizen of Broadway,' probably references to a gay underworld. According to Chauncey, by the 1910s Broadway had become known as one of the city's major cruising areas, and Wolfsheim's nostalgia for 'the old Metropole' located 'across the street' situates their location in Times Square, 'one of the city's most significant centers of male prostitution in the 1920s (221).

Moreover, even Nick seems to view New York as an iniquitous place, a place where he, perhaps, can be himself. New York presents a change of pace for Nick, and describes liking it because of “the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye” (57: c.f. Tyson, 348). At one point, while passing from West Egg towards New York in a car, Nick remarks: “Anything can happen now that we've
slid over this bridge [...] anything at all...”, he then goes on to offer some context, in looking back at the events: “Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (67). Returning to the concept of the hardcover closet, we can see its workings in the sentences above. Three dots are used to conclude the first sentence, leaving a space for implication. Regardless of Fitzgerald's artistic intentions, he doubtlessly offers a suggestion of something being left unsaid, and then follows it with Nick mentioning Gatsby in remembrance. Jordan Baker, also using language pregnant with suggestion, says about New York: “There's something very sensuous about it – over-ripe, as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands” (119: c.f. Tyson, 348).

It is also in New York where Nick has an encounter that changes from homosocial to homosexual. Nick travels to New York from West Egg with Tom Buchanan, stopping on the way to pick up Tom's mistress Myrtle (27). The trio then heads to an apartment where they, and other invited people, have a party. Nick comments that that afternoon was the second time in his life that he had been drunk and that everything therefore had a “dim, hazy cast over it” (32). It should be submitted that his inexperience with intoxication could work as a lubricant on the emotional breaks he describes himself as having. Certainly, it is not an esoteric notion that alcohol reveals a person's true nature. It is at this party that Nick meets the photographer Mr McKee, which is a momentous encounter in regards to Nick's sexual characterization. Nick describes McKee as being “a pale, feminine man” (32) and if we assume that there is a level of attraction between the two (because of events that will follow), it makes sense that Nick describes McKee's wife as “shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible” (32: c.f. Tyson, 344). Nick and McKee end up leaving the party together, something Froehlich says “clearly (if subtly) suggests a pickup” (215). The pair drunkenly stumble into the elevator where they start making vague plans about going out to lunch (39). Viewed from the surface, the confused vagueness of the passage might be ascribed to their inebriation. As Lois Tyson writes: “the scene easily can be interpreted as nothing more than a representation of their drunkenness” (p. 344). However, doing so would arguably place the characters in the hardcover closet, and reiterates Bech's analysis of our tendency to assume that homosexual acts among assumed (by default) heterosexuals only occur when they are not in full possession of their faculties. It should be argued that their vagueness regarding their plans to get lunch (when asked where, McKee answers “anywhere” [39]) is not because they are not planning lunch at all, but rather that they are planning to do something. Whether or not the offer is salacious, the non-specificity is suggestive. As Scott S. Derrick notes: “Fitzgerald simultaneously constructs a containing heterosexual narrative for the exploration and even celebration of a homoeroticism that need not speak its name” (199). Furthermore, while they are being conversationally, as well as spatially intimate in the cramped interior of the elevator, McKee is absentmindedly pawing at the lever controlling the elevator (a momentarily, signifying phallus) and when he is told to stop, he
answers: “I didn’t know I was touching it” (p. 39). The noise the elevator makes as it descends is described as “groaned” (39), something Frances Kerr notes “suggests deflation as either the frustrating nature of this sort of sexual situation for Nick or some kind of orgasmic climax” (414). What happens next is extraordinarily meaningful as the “intelligibility of the narrative breaks down” (Derrick, 202) and the passage enters a paragraph of near-stream-of-consciousness with several blatant omissions from Fitzgerald. Nick confirms that he and McKee should go out to lunch, and the next sentence starts with an ellipses: “...I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands” (39: c.f. Tyson, 344). It becomes apparent that McKee is showing Nick his photos, but the bedroom and the fact that McKee is in his underwear obscures the homosocial framework. It could easily be argued that McKee is showing him the pictures post or pre-coitally. Even if we willfully remove the suggestion of sex, the painted picture would naively be described as something other than intimate. Fitzgerald here goes through lengths to make sure the reader is aware of the undressed nature, and the suggestive intimacy of the bedroom, but never goes beyond the hanging connotations of the ellipsis. Lois Tyson describes it thus: “None of these signs would carry much weight by itself. But when clustered in this fashion they suggest a homoerotic subtext that no queer critic would miss” (345). In fact, we are never let in on how Nick feels about this and he never mentions it again. Either, we would have to assume, it had no effect on him and left to lasting impression, or he is deliberately avoiding bringing it up again, which would suggest the kind of suppression Nick himself speaks about. The encounter ends with Nick “half asleep” (40) on the train station, waiting for the early-morning train.

It now has to be asked where Nick's attraction lies, and in discussing Nick's attraction it is also important to remember the observation from Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, which states that “the heterosexuality and homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition” (31). Because it is not as simple as finding a binary identity and forcing it on to Nick, this needs to be kept in mind. In the novel, Nick begins having a relationship with Jordan Baker. This relationship seems to be largely orchestrated by Daisy, who says: “In fact I think I'll arrange a marriage. Come over often, Nick, and I'll sort of – oh – fling you together”. Ironically enough, Daisy even mentions locking the pair in a closet (23). But, even though a relationship between Nick and Jordan has been initiated, Nick fails to mention it in great detail. Frances Kerr notes: “Although Jordan’s masculine appearance and emotional reserve initially appeal to Nick, he is never interested in intimacy. Their exchanges are wooden throughout, marked by Nick's reserve and hesitation and what he suggests is Jordan's arrogant indifference” (418). Nick seems to be most physically attracted to Jordan as a consequence of what he would like their relationship to be like, something that is highlighted after Jordan tells Nick the labored and strenuous story of Gatsby's and Daisy's
romance (72 – 76). Afterward, the pair park beneath a bridge and Nick stops thinking about Daisy and Gatsby (77). He embraces Jordan in a rare act of tenderness and physical intimacy and describes her as a: “clean, hard, and limited person” (77). Returning to Kerr, she mentions that much has been made about the way Nick describes Jordan physically. Lois Tyson, who I believe commits the transgression of labeling Nick as a homosexual unaware of his own homosexuality (343), points heavily towards this masculinization of Jordan as a sign of Nick's sexual ambiguity, such as how she is often described in traditionally masculine terms. Tyson writes:

Upon first meeting [Jordan], Nick says, 'I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl with an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backwards at the shoulders like a young cadet', that is, like a young boy at a military school. Even when dressed in her most feminine attire, she is described in rather masculine terms: 'she wore her evening dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes – there was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings' (346).

This habit of Nick's is interesting. Assuming that his sexuality diverges from heterosexuality, he seems to describe, and be attracted to, women whose physical properties are not traditionally feminine. Although this fact could suggest sexual ambiguity, it is not sufficient evidence that Nick is homosexual because that would mean assuming that only traditionally feminine women could be attractive to heterosexual men. However, it is a curious occurrence since it is not limited to Jordan Baker. Another example of narration that questions Nick Carraway's sexuality comes later in the novel and is easily glossed over. It comes at a point in the story when the relationship between Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker starts to take shape. Nick is still involved – to some extent – with a woman “back home” (59). A woman he describes like this: “when that certain girl played tennis, a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip” (59). As stated previously, it would be callus, even irreverent, to ascribe a sexuality to a person merely based on what words they choose when describing someone. Yet when taking into account the example involving McKee mentioned above, it would be naïve not to note the fact that the primary visual description Nick gives this woman is of a masculine nature: a mustache. A temporary mustache whose disappearance will again reveal her feminine nature, yet it is with this masking masculinity he chooses to remember her. As Tyson points out discussing the same scene, Nick’s focus on the mustache creates “a degree of ambiguity” about his own feelings towards it (351). But the degree of ambiguity does not stop at the mustache, it is extended into the actual gender of the person he remembers. As stated by Froelich, Nick moved east to “escape the increasing social expectations back in the Midwest, where he is
being cajoled to marry” (210). Another telling sign as to why Nick is attracted to Jordan, and why their relationship, might not be of a romantic nature is that even when he is with her, his thoughts wander to his age and the “thinning list of single men to know” (129). Something important and often overlooked needs to be submitted about Nick and Jordan's relationship, namely that Jordan seems to be as disinterested in a romantic relationship with Nick as he is with her. The way Nick describes Jordan is often only attributed as a sign of Nick's sexual divergence. This is most likely because Nick is a central character in the story while Jordan exists in the periphery, making her less apt for further analysis. Not bringing Jordan into the light, however, would directly place a character fraught with sexual divergence in the hardcover closet. While the observations regarding how Nick describes Jordan are certainly relevant when trying to understand Nick's attraction, they do not fully represent Jordan's characterization in the novel. As expressed by Maggie Gordon Froehlich's essay on the subject, “many critics have understood Nick's use of conventionally masculine language to describe Jordan's body […] and his admiration of her conventionally masculine attributes […] only in terms of his homosexuality, yet clearly there is evidence to suggest that Jordan has no erotic interest in men” (83 – 84). Understood in another way, Jordan's existence within *The Great Gatsby* does not have to be interpreted merely as a mechanism to understand Nick's sexual divergence, but also, as stated by Tyson, that there exists a “possibility of a lesbian subtext in Jordan’s characterization” (346). Perhaps this mutual non-attraction is why the pair is drawn to one another: not because of romantic attraction but rather the lack of it. This would mean that, while together, sexual expectations would be reduced or non-existent, leading to a kind of non-spoken understanding. A friendship, which, to other people, looks like a relationship. This kind of understanding between Nick and Jordan would, moreover, decrease and ease up on societal expectations for both to find a partner.

As I stated previously, Nick does not spend a lot of time describing his relationship with Jordan Baker. When she is described she is often described in masculine terms. On the other hand, someone Nick does spend a lot of time describing is the eponymous Jay Gatsby. Aside from dedicating the entire novel to the man and the complete arch of their relationship, Nick goes into detail when describing Gatsby; which is something he neglects to do with Jordan. The amount of detail and sheer volume of text dedicated to Nick’s description of Gatsby over Jordan can be attributed to the fact that the book is about Gatsby, not Jordan Baker. But the suggestibility that informs Nick’s possible sexual divergence is rather about what is *said* in the text. Not only are the descriptions of Gatsby noticeably more dense and detailed, they tend to lean towards the more traditionally feminine and are especially romanticizing and glorifying. Nick calls the way Gatsby's smiles “understandingly” and notes that it is “one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance […] that you may come across four or five times in life” (49). Nick also notes that
Gatsby's “tanned skin was drawn attractively tight on his face and his short hair looked as though it were trimmed every day” (51: c.f. Tyson, 345). These descriptions are easily juxtaposed with Nick's descriptions of Jordan and spotting the difference is obvious. Kerr attributes this to the circumstance that Nick "identifies with and feels most romantically drawn not to 'masculine' women but to 'feminine' men" (418). What is feminine about Gatsby comes in several different forms. One prominent inter-textual signifier of femininity is his extensive wardrobe and the pink suit he is wearing at one point in the novel - not only the suit itself but also the attention it receives. Tom Buchanan is incredulous to whether or not Gatsby ever attended Oxford based on the pink color of his suit (116: c.f. Tyson, 345). While it needs to be acknowledged that in the novel pink is associated with Daisy and with Gatsby's claim to have gone to Oxford, it cannot be escaped that traditionally pink is seen as the ultimate feminine color (where blue is the polar opposite, and the ultimate masculine color). This means that suggested femininity creates a level of animosity towards Gatsby, and especially towards his masculinity. Again, it needs to be mentioned that colors like pink or attention to wardrobe says nothing about sexuality. Within the novel, however, it clearly creates a confusion among the characters that Nick seems affected by, as he at one point clearly states: “I must have felt pretty weird by that time, because I could think of nothing except the luminosity of his pink suit under the moon” (136: c.f. Tyson, 345). Henning Bech even states that Western society's hostile view towards homosexuality forces homosexuals – and, by extension, anyone resembling the homosexual mold – to “gain expression in interests and activities which in certain ways resemble homosexuality” (33). This, for Gatsby, would be the stereotypical (albeit incorrect) notion that gay men harbor a kind of femininity and are therefore especially interested in clothes. Although never explicitly spelled out, it seems clear that Nick feels a level of attraction towards Gatsby. Nick often describes Gatsby as lonely and isolated, and goes through lengths to situate him as miserable. This places the reader at a critical intersection: whether or not Nick is believable. The argument should be made that because of Nick's attraction, he could cognitively rephrase situations regarding Gatsby so that they fit what he would like to be the truth.

Nick's cognitive rephrasing can be observed especially well in two passages. The first one is at one of the legendary and characteristically identifying parties hosted by Gatsby. This is also the first of the parties Nick has attended, although Gatsby's reputation has preceded him, sowing a seed of curiosity within Nick. Once the orchestra starts playing and the attendees couple up for a slow dance, Nick spots Gatsby standing alone and remarks: “no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder […]” (52). It needs to be understood that Nick knows nothing about Gatsby at this point, just the hearsay to which he has been privy. So this note is rather strange. At no point does he describe whether or not Gatsby looks sad or discontented, but he rather implies the sadness of the scenario himself, or he perhaps believes that there is a sadness there
which will be universally understood. Regardless, the night ends with Nick leaving, and as he says goodbye to Gatsby finds that: “He smiled – and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it all the time” (54). Here Nick clearly finds his own interpretation and significance, since everything aside from the smile is his own interpretation of it.

The other instance of Nick's cognitive rephrasing comes later, as he is relaying the story of how James Gatz adopted the alter-ego and finagled himself into becoming Jay Gatsby. What is unclear, however, and also makes the passage interesting, is how he came across the very descriptive information he uses. The story Nick writes largely consists of moments he himself was present for, which gives them, and him, a certain level of believability. Nick’s believability, however, can only be overlooked by a critical eye insofar as whether or not the events transpired, while Nick's reactions, and impressions, have to be questioned as subjectivity. So since it is unclear how Nick got the information he himself uses, it would have to be assumed that he is dramatizing; which makes the uncanny sexualization a product of Nick's imagination. He describes the young Gatsby as wearing “a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants” and his body as “brown, hardening”, and adds that “he knew women early, and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them” (95). In other words: a strong, weather-beaten, drifter with a sexual prowess. This “fantasy” version of Gatsby strongly collides with the fancy, dainty and enigmatic host others see. The Gatsby of the past that Nick imagines, a person who has known women sexually to the point where he has reached an almost post-women sexuality, is radically different from the man with a closet of “shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of indian blue” (89: c.f. Tyson, 345). This suggests that Nick is not, in fact, more attracted to the femininity of Gatsby, but rather to a masculine version of Gatsby that might only exist in his head. But either because that attraction is not reciprocated or because of Gatsby's feminine characteristics, he retreats into imagining a Gatsby he never knew – and that might not have existed. Perhaps it is most poignantly expressed when Gatsby is speaking about his love, and his longing, for Daisy. The words strike a chord with Nick, who is reminded of “an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words” and as he tries to speak – tries to say something to Gatsby – his “lips parted like a dumb man's” but “made no sound, and what [he] had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever” (107). Nick, again, defaults to omission and leaves the reader to speculate, and the impression is that Nick was about to tell Gatsby something he remembered, something he obviously struggles to remember.

The above description of Gatsby is similar to how Nick describes Tom Buchanan, a description Scott S. Derrick calls “language of sadomasochistic desire” (201). A brutish man whose physical description is not unlike Jordan Baker:
Now he was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty, with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body – he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulders moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage – a cruel body (12).

Tom is a man of such unflinching masculinity that even clothes coded as feminine do not alter Nick's perception; a line of reasoning, as we have seen, cannot be applied to Gatsby. But aside from the sheer Atlas-like description of Tom, his function is not one of attraction to Nick. This can be ascribed to what Greg Forter says regarding characterization of feminine vs masculine in *The Great Gatsby*: “[Fitzgerald] was therefore less inclined to view modernity as a purely feminizing danger or to think of virile manhood as a viable solution to it” (145). Indeed, Tom could easily have functioned as another focal point of Nick's attraction, but instead he is described as a nefarious, hostile, man. Not only does he have a mistress, he at one point strikes her and breaks her nose (39). Tom even functions as an antithesis to any notion of homosexuality or homoeroticism, which would arguably create a distaste for him in the eyes of Nick. If Tom represents “virile manhood”, that means that virile manhood (uncompromising masculinity, that is) is implicit in everything from violence against women to Tom's fascination with eugenics. That is to say, virile manhood has a negative backside. Tom's fascination, even obsession, with tradition makes him an isolated force in the changing world of *The Great Gatsby*. In this sense, Tom would represent to Nick the kind of Midwest traditions he sought to escape. Tom raves about the need to advocate for the future prosperity and security of the white race (18) early on, but brings it up again further into the novel. Positioning himself as the opposite of Gatsby, as he also decries the progression of the “modern world”, Tom expresses his fear for the future: “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have marriage between black and white” (124). It is important to notice that Tom does not say *black people and white people*, but rather black and white. Tom establishes a framework of binary oppositions whose intermarriage would, to him, be immoral and unnatural. This is what same-sex marriage (and relationships) would be, using Tom's line of argument, as well. Edward Wasiolek argues that a comparison between Tom and Gatsby would not find much of a difference: they both host hedonistic parties, have affairs with married women and try to buy people's affection (14 – 15). Yet how they are portrayed differs starkly. This is further evidence of Nick's attraction to Gatsby, and
not Tom, as Nick sees Gatsby through rose-colored lenses. Wasiolek argues: “It takes some effort to separate oneself from what Nick sees and how he sees it. He is after all our narrative voice and he seems to be sane, judicious, and fair. In the tradition of commentary on Nick, he is our 'moral norm.' But he seems less than fair in the contrast he makes between Tom and Gatsby” (14). Fitzgerald's characterization of characters diverging from heteronormativity echoes the opinions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, who, according to author Thomas Piontek, “explained homosexuality as a congenital abnormality that results from a mismatch between physiological sex and emotional gender: homosexual men are female 'souls' trapped in male bodies; lesbians are male 'souls' trapped in women's bodies” (53). Regardless of what Fitzgerald's intention was, this argument can be applied to the characterizations of both Gatsby and Jordan. Each harbors a trait of the opposite gender as their “soul”, completing the idea that sexual divergence cannot come as raw femininity or masculinity. However, masculinity in a raw form, portrayed by Tom, is not admirable in *The Great Gatsby* either.

Another important aspect needs to be submitted concerning Nick’s attraction. The discussion above has centered on the masculine and feminine features that oppose the biological genders of Jay Gatsby and Jordan Baker, and the agreement of masculine features and biological gender in Tom. This is something that could easily lead a queer reading of the novel towards assuming that Nick is homosexual. But that would entail not accounting for the times Nick admits and shows attraction towards women without posing them against their inherent masculinity, as is the case with Jordan Baker. For instance, Nick mentions walking around New York and picking “out romantic women from the crowd” and entering “their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove” (57: c.f. Tyson, 350). Moreover, Nick mentions having an affair with a woman (57), which Tyson concludes is a sign of Nick going “out of his way” to appear as a “active heterosexual” (350). But this needs not be the case. A queer reading of Nick's sexual characteristics and behavior does not have to exclude him actually having affairs with women. That is only the case when the focal point of the analysis is proving, via the queer reading, that Nick is homosexual. Furthermore, Tyson ask the question: “Is Nick heterosexual, gay or bisexual?” (349) and then follows by stating the belief that he is homosexual. What should be submitted is that proving either would be hard, if not impossible, and that proving either is not essential to a queer reading of *The Great Gatsby*. The most cogent summary to be made regarding Nick's attraction is that it exists on a spectrum. He seems to be attracted to, and engage in affairs with, men and women alike.

In conclusion, it is easy to see that the subject of Nick's sexuality is complex, and that any classification would be reductive. This essay has argued how Nick's exposure to homosocial interactions in college and the army could have caused him to grow tired of the Midwest and move to the more progressive New York. This essay has also discussed the queer implications of New
York and the possibility of Nick having a homosexual encounter with Mr McKee. Through a closer examination of Nick's characteristics, Fitzgerald's stylized omissions and depiction of gender, Nick's reliability as a narrator, a discussion concerning Nick Carraway's sexuality that deviates from assumed heterosexuality, but that is still without sexual classification, has been reached. Nick seems to not be attracted to neither masculine women, feminine men, nor masculine men more. However, the most important analysis made is that Nick Carraway clearly deviates from the societal norm, and the societal habit of labeling individuals. This, as we have seen, makes the analysis of Nick more diverse, interesting, dense and representative.
Works Cited.


