Looking at Plots of Three Famous Novels

It is impossible to come up with a universally acceptable single definition of a perfect plot because authors have their own unique ways of organizing and presenting their material. However, some features seem common to good plots.

1. Using the esthetics of omission, a good plot communicates its ideas more by implication than statement.

2. All factual details are interconnected and have psychological and emotional linkage besides the cause-and-effect connection of logic, which sometimes may be suspended for impact.

3. Nothing is superfluous; all events, actions, and characters serve a purpose and contribute to the plot's unity.

4. Keeping in mind the reader's/viewer's need for entertainment along with instruction, it has the elements of mystery and suspense, through manipulation of chronology, point of view, flashback, premonition, suspension of logic, parallelism, coincidence, and similar strategies.

5. It's events, settings, moods, and questions reverberate in the reader's imagination long after the book is finished. In E.M. Forster's words, "[expansion] is the idea that the novelist [or literary artist] must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out." (p.169)

If we apply these principles to three acknowledged masterpieces of the twentieth century, The Great Gatsby, The Stranger, and A Passage to India, we notice all of them have almost all of the qualities noted above. They have suspense, mystery, endless

suggestiveness, interconnectedness of all details in an intricately patterned plot, and their endings suggest not "rounding off but opening out."

From this list of plot-structuring principles, the first item –relating to the esthetics of omission—calls for more creativity on the author's part and a similar creative effort by the reader to appreciate this device. Only this device will be discussed in detail, since the rest of the principles are relatively easy to understand and appreciate. Evidently, a plot is only a shell unless it is energized and animated with appropriate content and methods of organization. We, therefore, need to examine how each author meets this challenge. Offering for our contemplation far too many questions that answers, all three novels have a common theme that concerns the impossibility of ever knowing the truth. To draw up a plot's architectural plan for a novel with this kind of theme, an author's reliance on the strategy of the esthetics of moission seems a natural choice. This device enables authors to communivate important ideas by withholding rather than giving information. It is not surprising that all three authors make use of it effectively. In Gastsby, for example, we never know why the narrator Nick Carraway did not tell Tom Buchanan and others the truth that it was Daisy, not Gatsby, who ran over and killed Myrtle Wilson. Myrtle's husband George killed Gatsby because Tom had misinformed him about the real killer of Myrtle. It was Tom's wife Daisy who was driving Gatsby's car when she ran over Myrtle. Towards the end of the novel when Tom tells Nick the lie that Gatsby "ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car," why didn't Nick confront Tom with the truth? Exercising the very effective device of the esthetics of omission, all that Fitzgerald allows Nick to say is this: "There was nothing that I could say, except the one *unutterable* fact that it wasn't true." (Italics for emphasis; p.187)

Why is the truth "unutterable"? Does it mean that Nick did not even try to tell the truth? Wasn't it Nick's duty to set the record straight so that his friend Gatsby's name is not tarnished with such a huge and wrongful accusation? Fitzgerald's oblique style forces us to answer this question in many different ways. Had Nick given up—like Meursault in The Stranger, and Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India—on the possibility of ever convincing anyone about the truth? Did he think that Tom already knew the truth from his wife Daisy but was going to deny it? Was Nick doing what Gatsby would have liked him to do—that is, never implicate Daisy in any kind of trouble and take all the blame on himself?

By giving Nick the above-quoted line about the "unutterable facts" at the end, Fitzgerald makes the novel endlessly suggestive. There is one more notable example of artistic omission that evokes suspense and suggestion. It concerns the otherwise articulate Nick's speechlessness when he wanted to tell Gatsby something important: "Through…forever." (p.118) The importance of what the plot includes in the novel or excludes from it was noted by Fitzgerald himself: "What I cut out of it both physically and emotionally would make another novel." (Preface to The Great Gatsby, 1934, Modern Library Edition)

In this novel, Fitzgerald did achieve his ideal: "I want to write something *new*—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned" (Fitzgerald)[i] It is not surprising that one of the most influential critics of the twentieth century called the novel "The first step American fiction has taken since Henry James." (Reprinted in The Crack-Up; these words are from a letter Eliot wrote to Fitzgerald).

In Albert Camus' The Stranger, a similar enigmatic situation prevails with regard to the real reason why Meursault shot the Arab. Whe asked the reason for his crime, Meursault says "It was because of the sun." (p.103) By giving his protagonist these true but enigmatic words, Camus makes the hero's confused reticence suggest a lot more than what could have been stated with as much effect. The truth becomes implausible even to Meursault himself. Earlier, in his memories, Meursault had given a detailed description of the shooting which would have stirred sympathy for him in the judge and the jury. During his trial, however, all he can do is blurt out that "it was because of the sun." What he says is the truth but, understood only by the readers who have read his earlier account of the fateful shooting. Why does Camus make Meursault give such an absurd answer that would lead to his conviction? Surely he could have made Meursault repeat the details from his earlir account. Why did he choose not to do so? Through this withholding of details, Camus draws our attention to a serious matter. Just a minute earlier in his trial, Meursault had clearly stated that he "never intended to kill the Arab." Instead of giving Meursault's statement due importance, the judge acts as if he didn't even hear what Meursault said. He absurdly insists that Meursault "state precisely the motives for [his] act." (p.103) How could there be a motive when Meursault had never intended the killing? It is like everyone's misunderstanding in wrongly condemning him as someone incapable of remorse for the murder he has committed. The truth once again is that his words are misconstrued, and subtle shades of meaning are used to condemn him. When asked by the judge if Meursault was sorry for what he had done, he said that "more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed." (p.70) Meursault notices the judge's predisposition to find him guilty and when asked the ridiculously absurd question as to

his motive for the crime after he has clearly stated that he had no intention of killing the Arab, becomes flustered: Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed." (p.102) Under the tyranny of the disbelieving audience, the honest and truthful Meursault is made to look and feel untruthful. At that moment, both Camus' readers and his protagonist are made to feel that it is impossible to expect justice from a judicial system that focuses on irrelevant issues of conformity to arbitrary social norms instead of trying the individual for the crime. Camus communicates this important impression by excluding, during the trial, Meursault's detailed account of the shooting. In view of the prejudiced and hostile judge and the jury, this exclusion—Meursault's state of forced wordlessness—seems natural, not contrived. A disturbing theme that Camus is able to communicate effectively through his method of exclusion of certain expected details is that the truth sometimes can sound like a lie and a lie can sound truthful. In this case, the prosecutor's lie sounds believable, whereas Meursault's truth sounds implausible. To make his point absolutely clear, later in the novel Camus demonstrates another honest and truthful person. Marie's helplessness against the unjust system during her testimony: "Marie began to sob, saying it wans't like that…and that she was being made to say the opposite of what she was thinking." (p.94)

By adding this device of coincidence to the esthetics of omission, camus is able to deepen the mystery and suggest another important theme that we cannot free our lives of random events that have no recognizable causes and that logic is not adequate to explain some of life's mysteries. In the novel, it does sound strange and incredible that Meursault ended up returning to the same spot where the Arab had stabbed Raymond. It

also seems strange that Meursault was armed with the same gun that he had taken away from Raymond to avoid bloodshed. Who could have ever imagines that Meursault himself would end up using the weapon he had tried hard to put out of the picture. By carefully using coincidence together with the esthetics of omission in the form of the protagonist's reticence, forced on him by circumstances, Camus is able to design an impressive plot for his novel.

Esthetics of Omission in A Passage to India

E.M. Forster uses the esthetics of omission in a crucial part of the plot: We are never told who attempted to rape Adela Quested. She first wrongly accuses the innocent Dr. Aziz but takes back her charge during the trial. Nevertheless, we do not know the real culprit, nor do we know with certainty that such an attempt was in fact made. There is a hint that Adela might have suffered from a hallucination. Another mystery in the novel concerns the meaning of the shattering echo in the Marabar Caves. All we know is that hearing the echo is an unnerving and jolting experience for some (such as Mrs. Moore and Adela) and totally harmless to others such as the native Indians. The meaning of the echo, however, eludes us. The narrator mentions that there are "some exquisite echoes in India [but]…the echo in a Marabar cave is not like these, it is utterly devoidof distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. 'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum' or 'ou-boum'." As for the effect of the echo on Mrs. Moore, "…the echo began is some indiscernible way to undermine her [Mrs. Moore's] hold on life…it had managed to murmur… 'Everything exists, nothing has

value'." (p.149) However, to the native Indians, the echo conveys no such shattering message. Making an ancient Marabar cave the setting for this echo, adds to its intensification and symbolic richness, because a cave suggests the inner reaches of the unconscious, and the two English women's experiences in the cave reflect their hidden states of mind. It is important to note that by leaving the meaning of the echo unfixed, Forster is able to leave open the possibility of numerous interpretations. This is how Wilfred Stone, for example, interprets the echo: "We are…personalities **COPY FROM NOTES IN THE NOVEL** Forster's use of the device of artistic omission invites numerous such provocative readings. It is important to note that all three authors exercise the esthetics of omission by purposely leaving out information to make is hunger for it all the more.

We have seen how the three novelists are able to communicate the theme of the elusive nature of truth through the esthetics of omission.

OTHER PLOT-STRUCTURING DEVICES IN THE THREE NOVELS

Besides the deliberate exclusion of certain expected details to achieve multiple possibilities of meanings for complex questions, there are other more evident devices that authors use in their plot construction. Let us turn to them as they appear in the three novels.[1]

VISIBLE PLOTTING DEVICES IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

In The Great Gatsby, the early identifiable elements of plot construction are parallelism, flashback, and use of symbolism to tie in various parts.

Parallelism is noticeable in the numerous parties which Fitzgerald uses to introduce various characters and organize details of the actions and values. In Chapter One, the first party at Tom and Daisy's mansion, where Nick meets Jordan Baker, is followed by the party at Tom's mistresses Myrtle Wilson's apartment. That party introduced the streak of violence (Tom breaks Myrtle's nose) that is to explode later. The Third Chapter describes one of Gatsby's parties, to which people flock just to have a good time. Most of the so-called guests don't even know Gatsby. Chapter Six mentions a party at Gatsby's to which Daisy brings Tom with her. It is here that Tom, who suspects intimacy between his wife and Gatsby develops a strong dislike for his rival. In the climactic next chapter (Seven) is another party—this one at Tom and Daisy's. We remember that Chapter One was organized arounda party at their mansion. Fitzgerald uses the telephone to link the two chapters and to introduce negative features of machines. In Chapter One, Tom's adultery was revealed to us through his phone conversations with his mistress. Here we are told that "Through the hall of the Buchanans' house blew a faint wind, carrying the sound of the telephone bell out to Gatsby and me as we waited at the door." (p.121) There is an ironic reversal here in that Tom was cuckolding George Wilson in Chapter One, but here he is being cuckolded by Gatsby.

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[1] Fitzgerald's novel is covered in more detail because it has not been discussed elsewhere in this book. Topics relating to The Stranger and A Passage to India have been included in other chapters.

Besides parallelism, Fitzgerald uses contrast in narrative styles. He uses straight forward chronology to give information about the straightforward narrator Nick. However, the story of Gatsby is organized through a series of flashbacks in a nonchronological order. Moreover, he uses several narrators, adding Jordan Baker in that role, to tell the story of Daisy and Gatsby's past relationship. Mr. Wolfsheim brings in his version of Gatsby's story, calling him "a perfect gentleman" as well as an "Oggsford man." (p.76) Gatsby's father also becomes a narrator after his son's death, to reveal that Gatsby's tragedy remains ununderstood by all except Nick. This complicated style of organizing Gatsby's mysterious story is appropriate and artistically effective.

Symbols in this novel are an important source of grouping thematic details. Along with the telephone, which was mentioned as a negative symbol because it intrudes to disrupt relationships, there are other menacing symbols of destruction. Automobiles are associated with death; dust and ashes are symbolic of industrialization of farming land, the consequent decimation of nature, and disintegration of the American dream. The huge billboard of the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg shows misplaced faith in the new icons in the American pantheon. A line of "grey cars crawls along an invisible track" in the valley of ashes. A "dust-covered wreck of a Ford…crouched in a dim corner" in Wilson's garage, and Gatsby's car that killed Myrtle is called "the death car." The automobile accident of Chapter Three after one of Gatsby's parties foreshadows the accident that kills Myrtle. In Chapter Four, Nick and Gatsby see a hearse as they drive into New York, this raising the number of death cars to two. The hearse they see is also a premonition of the three deaths that later occur in the story, just as the mournful foghorn that opens Chapter Eight preconfigures Gatsby's death. But Fitzgerald does not

have to rely on foreshadowing alone to create suspense. At one point he tells us exactly what is going to happen but in such a way that it creates almost unbearable moments of suspense. Before we know anything about the fatal car accident, for example, Fitzgerald has Nick tell us: "So we [Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Nick] on toward death through the cooling twilight." (p.143) This sudden statement is followed by a major transition that Fitzgerald indicates by using blank space. Suddenly, dramatically, we are told of the inquest, but whose death is being examined we do not know for a few paragraphs of wrenching suspense. This is a masterpiece of arrangement of details for maximum impact.

Another negative image of machinery is that of the juicer in Gatsby's kitchen that squeezes life out of "crates of oranges and lemons," reducing them to "a pyramid of pulpless halves." It is notable that Fitzgerald gives this convenience item clearly negative connotations. There is also an implied analogy between the processing of fruit and a similar processing of people at Gatsby's parties.

Dust and ashes crop up everywhere in the novel. The opening of Chapter Two contains a famous passage that describes the desolate "valley of ashes." It is

"a fantastic farm…right." (p.27) Instead of nourishing and vitalizing human life, the abused land is able to create only ash-grey men" carrying on their "obscure operations." (p.27) Brooding over the "solemn dumping ground" that is "bounded on one sie by a small foul river" are the gigantic eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, whom George Wilson mistakes for the eyes of God. Showing this character worshipping the billboard as a god serves as a warning about the consequences of basing our faith on impersonal icons of exploitive industrialism and advertisement. In the midst of these negative

images, echoes of Nick's nostalgic longings for an Edenic, pre-lapsarian past are heard when he imagines New York as "the city seen for the first time, in its wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world." (p.73) Feeding this nostalgia and also a lament on the death of a dream are Nick's famous words that Fitzgerald puts towards the end of the novel. They describe America's magic through Dutch sailors' eyes as they happened to come upon " a fresh green breast of the new world" to dream "the last and greatest of all human dreams." (p.189) Illustrating Fitzgerald's intricate plotting patterns, the "green breast' of this description links the book's ending with the green light on Daisy's dock that was mentioned at the end of Chapter One. It was toward this light that Gatsby "stretched out his arms" in "trembling" adoration. (pgs. 25-26)

No discussion of symbolism in <u>The Great Gatsby</u> would be complete without an interpretive look at the wind that is mentioned at least ten times in the novel to connect themes and details.

Nick tells us he had a "short affair with a girl…but her brother began throwing mean looks in my direction, so when she went on her vacation in July <u>I let it blow quietly away.</u>" (p.61) (Underlining for emphasis) Here is a suggestion that the wind is symbolic of all shifting and ephemeral relationships in the story—a fact that is also emphasized in the subtle symbolism of Nick's writing the names of Gatsby's guests on a railway timetable. The fact that the schedule is effective July 5, 1922, suggests that the 4th of July celebrations are over and one is left facing the anticlimax of the aftermath. Another wind image underscores casual contact and temporary ties: "…the air is alive with chatter and laughter and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names." (p.44) Still another

wind-swept sentence echoes the flirtatious, ever-changing connections: The "wind in the trees…blew the wires and made the lights go off and on again as if the house had winked into the darkness," (p.86)

The wind images are too many to discuss in their entirety, but deserving of attention are two more descriptions of the wind that combine and connect the themee of finality in one case and a dramatic turn in the other. The first image makes the wind draw to a close the cycle of Gatsby's life: "With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress [carrying Gatsby's body] moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough…water." (p.170) It is as if the wind is composing Gatsby's requiem, using a cluster of Autumn leaves "like the leg of a compass" and Gatsby's blood for ink.

The very last image of the wind in the novel is also of the nature of a requiem, this one meant for Nick: "After Gatsby's death…home." (p.185) **MISSING SOME PART OF THIS QUOTE (I THINK)**

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[i] Cited on p. VII of "Preface," The Great Gatsby, ed Matthew J. Bruccoli. (N.Y. Scribner, 1992)