Location and Class
A Study of the Significance of Place and Social Standing in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby

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En studie om betydelsen av plats och klasstillhörighet i Fitzgeralds The Great Gatsby

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Abstract

This essay focuses on location and class in *The Great Gatsby*. The essay argues that the aspect of location has a defining role in the characters’ effort to become a part of the leisure class. The essay will show that some characters use location to elevate their social status and consequently become members of the leisure class: Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway, Tom and Daisy Buchanan all use location to elevate their social standing. In addition the essay will show how location works against the characters Myrtle and George in their desire for a better life, and consequently they have to use other methods to try to acquire what they want. Thus, as location is shown to be a method for elevating the characters’ social status it also becomes apparent that this method is only available for those who already have a substantial amount of money.
F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* can be said to be a stinging portrayal of the 1920’s leisure class in America revealing all their imperfections and faults. As the novel commences we are in a time in which the First World War has ended and the Roaring Twenties begin. The Roaring Twenties - also known as the Jazz Age - was a reaction to the war and the hard years of living it bought. As Alastair Henry and Catharine Walker Bergström mention in their book *Texts and Events*, while the rural areas of America where still religious, in the cities the Roaring Twenties had taken hold and “The American Dream seemed to be there for the taking, even for women” (372). Although one of the favorite pastimes seemingly was to party and drink excessively this was also the age of prohibition. Due to the 18th Amendment to the constitution in 1919 it was forbidden to transport and sell alcoholic beverages. This led to the beginning of bootlegging and the business grew substantially with a large underground network. Fitzgerald himself was a man from the Midwest who made his way East to enroll at Princeton University. His own experiences of the Roaring Twenties came to be the foundation for *The Great Gatsby* and the many problems the characters face in the novel (Henry and Bergström 372).

As the novel begins we are gradually introduced to a number of different locations, places where we find characters that have a key role in telling the story of the main character, Jay Gatsby. Throughout the novel we are also introduced to the people of the leisure class. The term leisure class is said to have been coined by Thorstien Veblen when in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he describes the leisure class as belonging to “the highest and pecuniary class” (71). The leisure class consists of people who are in a position of great wealth and consequently can spend their life in leisure. In other words they do not have to have an occupation in order to live in comfort. However this is not to say that these people cannot have an occupation but if they do it would be an occupation that is considered suitable for their class (Veblen 8). My aim with this essay is to show that the aspect of location in *The Great Gatsby* has a defining role for the characters who want to have a place in the higher social classes. My thesis is that in the novel *The Great Gatsby* location is essential in order for the characters to elevate their social standing and consequently be included in the leisure class. More specifically the essay will show how the Midwestern characters Gatsby, Nick, Daisy and Tom use location to elevate their social standing. Moreover the essay will also show how location works against the characters Myrtle and George in their attempts to make a better life for themselves, which consequently leads them to use other methods to obtain what they want. Thus the essay will show how location defines the characters no matter which social group they come from. As the main characters’ stories mostly have their basis in the life they had in the Midwest, the first part of the essay will focus on the location that is the background for the characters, more specifically the West. After that account, the essay will turn to analyzing the importance of place for the characters’ social ambitions.
The Midwestern part of America is viewed in the novel as being a place where people with a questionable background can be found. As C. B Valencius points out this is based upon the fact that the ancestors of the Midwestern people where mostly immigrants with a background in farming. This was an effect of America getting control over areas such as Arkansas and Missouri through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The farmers moving West were people “frustrated by the rocks of New England” and the “higher land prices of the East” drove people to make the journey West (Valencius 124). This desire to improve the lot that was given to them is mirrored in the novel, as can be seen in the way Fitzgerald’s characters leave the Midwest for the East where the opportunities they are in search of can be found. This desire that inspired people to move West and the characters in *The Great Gatsby* to move East can best be, in short, called The American Dream. Yet this attitude towards the West leaves the Midwestern characters with a desire to rid themselves of the place where they were born in order not to be seen as people with a questionable background. In the novel one can detect a sense a dissimilarity between the West and the East, something John Brooks discusses in an article. He reflects on the West and East situation in the novel in a thought-provoking way. He states that Fitzgerald’s approach of dividing the novel into West and East is linked with the past and present, “…the Middle West presented through metadiagetic narrative suggesting a nostalgic look back toward Victorian times, and a characterization of the modern and industrious East set in present narrative time.” (Brooks 2) As Brooks says, the Midwestern part of the novel resides in the past and the East in the present. As Jerry Carrier points out in *The Making of the Slave Class* it gave America the unwanted title of being “a nation of farmers” a description many Europeans referred to trough the nineteenth and twentieth century (6). As the West was some years before seen as the place where one could profit from the land, in Gatsby’s 1920’s the East is the place for making dreams come true. The East is where the story begins, and we find Gatsby, Nick, Daisy and Tom living on East and West Egg and Myrtle and George living in The Valley of Ashes. Within New York City we can even here find an East - West difference where the more fashionable people are situated on the East Egg, as will be discussed further in the essay. Through acquiring a home in one of the more exclusive locations in New York Nick Carraway consciously chooses a location which can enhance his social standing. He moves to New York in order to build a career believing it is where he is going to be able to achieve his goals. He feels that the West is not enough for him even though he is a man from a “…prominent, well-to-do…” family that has been living in the Midwest for three generations (Fitzgerald 8). Being a man of a good family he is able to choose an occupation in the bond business, which in turn defines him as a part of the higher social scale. As Torstein Veblen points out a man’s work is very much viewed as a social factor, a man from the leisure class would not degrade himself by working within the industry
As he is a man from a wealthy family he can afford to rent a place on a fashionable location as the West Egg. Even though the house is a bungalow he does manage to find a place in one of the more exclusive areas in New York City. West Egg is a fashionable place for the wealthy to live and because of that signals social status. Though being described in the novel as less fashionable than the East Egg, West Egg is still a location fitting for a certain kind of people. Thus the East is, to Nick, a place where he can become competent in an occupation fitting his social standing, with a home that reflects his social status. Although the house is small and he cannot show it off to flaunt his wealth in the same way as other characters can, just being able to mention in conversations that he lives on West Egg, neighbor to Gatsby, signal his social standing and wealth. Ultimately this confirms that even for a seemingly moral man wealth and social standing matter, which he displays in him securing a home in the desirable location, the West Egg.

Even though Nick might not involve himself in all the parts of the life of the leisure class there is further evidence that he cares about his social standing. He is portrayed as a man that inspires confidence with a seemingly good sense of morality. While Nick can be seen as someone who stands apart from the leisure class it is here he, in terms of wealth, belongs. The fact that he is very aware of the West Egg being less fashionable than East Egg can imply that he does care about how the location is perceived by New York City’s society. Evidence of him remarking the difference between the two locations can be seen when he attends one of Gatsby’s parties for the first time. Here he refers to the people attending representing “the nobility of the countryside” and amongst the crowd of people one could find people from East Egg “condescending to West Egg and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gaiety” (Fitzgerald 51). While being the less desirable location of the two it is still a location suited for the upper classes and Nick residing there is a clear sign of his awareness of his social standing. To live on West Egg in short supports his claims as a person with a certain social status and consequently a member of the leisure class.

The protagonist Jay Gatsby, is the only character who comes from the West that is of a more deprived origin, financially and in terms of class. In Gatsby’s project to become a part of the leisure class one can find several indications that his social status is connected with the aspect of location. One of the first things he does as a young man is to change his name; he rejects his family name Gatz and becomes Gatsby. As Barbara Will points out in her article “The Great Gatsby and the Obscene Word” the name Gatz is “…haunted by ethnic, and specifically Jewish, overtones” (133). Though the name can be carried by people who are and are not Jewish it gives society the opportunity to view him as being inferior for that reason alone. Consequently he wants to detach himself from any name that would bring him “socioeconomic inequalities” due to his religious background as Sean McCloud and William Mirola mention in their book *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History and Politics* (29). Thus Gatsby leaves the family name behind as a first step to become someone...
else. Though being from a deprived origin Gatsby does not seem to be especially troubled by this fact, until he meets and falls in love with Daisy. Since Daisy is so far above him in social standing and wealth he feels that he is not enough and gets it affirmed when coming back from the war and finding her married to someone else. It is then he decides to make something out of himself and decides that the place to achieve this is New York, a place filled with opportunities.

Nevertheless he is a person that seemingly has always strived to better himself not just to become the Gatsby we know in the novel. In his early life when living with his parents in the West he strived to be a better person, as seen in the schedule he set up for himself where one of the points was to “be better to parents” (Fitzgerald 180). This in some ways shows that Gatsby bears a sense of goodness, a sense which he manages to keep throughout the novel despite him being associated with people of the unscrupulous kind. Yet this strive to better himself in many ways can be linked to his upbringing in the Midwest. He is a man that comes, as previously mentioned, from a more disadvantaged origin, a fact that made him want to achieve something with his life. One can be lead to believe that the prospect of a life in the Midwest initially is his main motivator in order to get ahead; he realized that the life of many like him, being poor, was not something he wanted. He sees the people surrounding him and finds it to be unsatisfactory, describing his parents as “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” (105). In his mind they are completely unsatisfactory to the extent that in his imagination they are not really his parents at all. Furthermore after being shown the good life by Dan Cody - a millionaire whom Gatsby saved - and the loss of it when Cody dies amplifies the feeling of his surrounding being unsatisfactory (106). Consequently it is a contributing factor to the departure for the East later on. The Midwest is not a part of the country where opportunities are ample for a man like Gatsby. He finds that in order to gain wealth, power and rise in class he must leave.

Even though the East is where Gatsby will make his dreams come true he must find the means to achieve them. He finds that the most promising and easy approach is to plunge himself into the world of bootlegging, selling alcohol illegally. Gatsby’s 1920’s America was a time also known as the Jazz age which meant night life and a desire for alcohol. As Mitchell Newton-Matza points out in his book Jazz Age: People and Perspectives the alcohol that people wanted was illegal due to the 1920’s being “the era of prohibition” (37). However this did not hinder people from purchasing it nonetheless. That is most likely one of the reasons for Gatsby finding the business so lucrative. After gaining a substantial fortune Gatsby buys a grand mansion on West Egg and is now spending his time throwing numerous, endless parties where ostensibly everyone is invited.

I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby’s house I was the one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited – they went there. Sometimes they
came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission. (Fitzgerald 27)

Gatsby in my opinion throws these parties in order to show off his prosperity to the members of the leisure class, to let everyone see that he is a man of substantial means. As Susan Currell mentions in *American Culture in the 1920’s* this was the favorite pastime for people of the 1920’s America, to spend their time at parties with an extensive emphasis on alcohol. Fitzgerald and other writers of the 1920’s led “destructive lifestyles, drinking excessively” (36). As the famous writers of the roaring twenties had alcoholic problems during the time of prohibition in America it is understandable that it reflected into their work. After making a substantial amount of money James Gatz transforms into Jay Gatsby. This means creating a new persona, presenting himself as always having been wealthy and that this wealth had not been obtained by his illegal business of bootlegging. There are many rumors going around concerning who he is and how and where he got all his money from. One of the rumors of his wealth is that he would have inherited it from a family member. “Well, they say he’s a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s. That’s where all his money comes from” (Fitzgerald 38). Since he obtained his wealth illegally it is important to Gatsby that the origin of his wealth is unknown and preferably he wants people believing the story of him inheriting the money, thus creating the illusion of him being a man of consequence with invented family relations to hide his background and to conceal where his money comes from.

However, the endeavor to become a man of consequence is not solely aimed toward Gatsby getting respect from the people of the leisure class as a whole, but especially toward earning the respect and attention from one special person, Daisy. Gatsby is in love with a woman who is married to another man, a man who is extremely wealthy. In Gatsby’s mind the only way to make Daisy leave her husband for him is to become wealthy himself hence his involvement in the bootlegging business (Henry and Walker Bergström 373). After gaining his fortune he even buys a home on Long Island to be close to her. “Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay.” (Fitzgerald 85). He buys it to impress Daisy and to let her know that he is now in possession of a quite substantial wealth, to let her see that he can provide for them. Gatsby’s attempts to get Daisy can be said to make him a romantic, as Hays mentions in ‘Oxymoron in *The Great Gatsby*’: according to Gatsby one can make it through hard work and perseverance, and by that gain both “social acceptance and respect” by the likes of Tom Buchanan (319). As many of the other characters in the novel Gatsby has neither birth nor money which is what the Easterners find vital in society. Therefore he has to compensate for this by being the best man he can in terms of having money and an air about him that will intrigue people and make them forget his past. Thus one can see Gatsby using location to establish himself as being a man with wealth and social status in order to earn the respect of the woman he loves, Daisy, and to be close to her once more.
Throughout the novel one can see more examples of Gatsby using location in order to prove himself and elevating his social standing. For instance he lies about his family connections telling Nick that he was “…the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West – all dead now” (Fitzgerald 71). Gatsby also mentions that he was from San Francisco although there are rumors about him actually having been brought up in the swamps of Louisiana and then having made his way East to the lower East Side of New York (55). To explain the origins of his wealth Gatsby creates a story about how he acquired it. However there is an incident in the novel where Gatsby makes a blunder and almost reveal to Nick how he got his money.

“...It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it. – I thought you inherited your money. – I did, old sport, he said automatically, but I lost most of it in the big panic – the panic of the war (97).”

This shows that location is vital in order to be seen as a part of the leisure class and the truth about his background as a man from the West must be hidden behind stories and lies.

Gatsby’s home on West Egg is significant in his usage of location to further support his aim of elevating his social status. As discussed in the previous paragraph Gatsby buys a house on West Egg to be close to Daisy. However the purchase of this house also suggests that his home serves as a symbol of this wealth and his social status. West Egg is, in the novel, considered to be less fashionable than East Egg however a home on West Egg is still a symbol of class. Gatsby’s home is described by Nick in the novel as:

“...colossal affair by any standard – it was factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden (Fitzgerald 11).”

This description suggests that no one without a substantial amount of money can afford a place like this and that opinion is exactly what Gatsby is aiming for. He shows off his wealth and social status through having a great house with the purpose of becoming a part of the leisure class.

Furthermore, to link social status and the aspect of location one can discuss the endless rumors concerning his connections to England and mainly Oxford. In the novel Europe is central as a location for the elite and can be used by characters such as Gatsby to establish his social standing. One rumor circling around about Gatsby and his connection to Europe is that he supposedly is an Oxford man, a rumor that he seemingly started himself. According to Jordan, Gatsby once confided to her that “…he was an Oxford man.” (Fitzgerald 55). This proves that Gatsby knows that in order to be seen as a man of consequence there can be no James Gatz from the Midwest. To acquire some sort of social power, to be a man of importance, he has to find a way to be an accepted member of
New York’s higher-class. For instance in one of the dialogs with Nick, Gatsby shows Nick a picture of him and some other students from his time at Oxford (73). In the novel Gatsby says that it is a picture he always has with him. This can imply that whenever someone would question him on attending Oxford or not, he could use the photo as evidence of him actually being an Oxford man. One can detect from the quote above that Europe still is an important factor for the people of the leisure class, and the same goes for the rumor about Gatsby having been “an Oxford man” (55) that he started himself. As he claims he has attended Oxford once New York’s society will undoubtedly recognize him as being a man of consequence.

Gatsby using a European location to obtain social status signals the significance Europe and Europeans still have for society in the East. This can also be seen in one of Nick’s remarks as he enters Gatsby’s house for the first time attending a party. “I was immediately struck by the number of young Englishmen dotted about; all well dressed…” (48). This can imply that in order to keep up the appearance of him being an Oxford man he invites young Englishmen that people might think are former fellow students from Oxford. This is also evidence of the importance of Europe to society in the East, to have connections in Europe solidifies one’s social status. Gatsby claims: “I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition” (71). To keep up the appearance of having a strong connection to Europe Gatsby buys clothes from England for every new season, spring and fall (99). All of these factors indicate that Gatsby is using location to further elevate his social status and as a result secure his position in New York City’s leisure class.

On East Egg we find two other important characters in the novel. East Egg, located just across the bay from West Egg, is viewed as being the more fashionable of the two. This is where the even wealthier and more prominent people reside, those with old money. The houses on the island are described as being “white palaces” upon an island that “glittered along the water” (Fitzgerald 11). It is on East Egg that Tom and Daisy Buchanan live in one of these palaces in full comfort and prosperity.

Even though there is no question about how Tom and Daisy Buchanan obtained their wealth, they nevertheless use the aspect of location to further establish their social status just as Gatsby does. Both of them come from the Midwest a fact that they try to hide through money, social power and possessions. Tom Buchanan had been an extremely successful football player in college and according to Nick been one of those people who reach an immense success at the age of twenty-one and everything else after that becomes an anticlimax (Fitzgerald 12). Tom is also from a family that is described as being “enormously wealthy” and that “…even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach…” (12). Even though Tom Buchanan is a man with a substantial wealth however he is not ‘old money’ which is one of the more vital criterions of being a member of the
Eastern leisure class. Tom then uses his capital in different ways in order to get ahead, to be taken as a man of consequence. The most obvious example of Tom and Daisy using location to show their social standing can be seen in their decision to move East and purchase a house on East Egg. Knowing that East Egg is a very fashionable place to live Tom and Daisy use some of their vast fortune to purchase a house there, a house that is described in the novel as being a white palace (11). In other words they are using the aspect of location to truly become a part of the leisure class in New York. Moreover the fact that they can afford to live on East Egg where the people of ‘old money’ can be found aids their attempt of being their equal in society. The house is described by Nick as being a “…Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay” (12). One can see that the previous statements about Tom taking pride in his possessions also concerns his home on East Egg. As he states “I’ve got a nice place here, he said, his eyes flashing about restlessly. It belonged to Demaine, the oil man” (13-14). Knowing that purchasing a home on East Egg and that it had once been owned by someone prominent Tom is using his money to show off his social standing through the aspect of location. One can also look at the purchase of the house on East Egg as a way to further cover the fact that Tom and Daisy are both originally from the Midwest. As East Egg is seen as extremely fashionable it could be seen as a proclamation of their wealth, power and social status. Furthermore Tom and Daisy are like Gatsby using Europe as a way to establish themselves socially. They spent a year in France doing nothing but spend time where the rich could be rich with each other and play polo (Fitzgerald 12). As Nick describes it Tom and Daisy went there for no apparent reason. However one could claim that it was a way for them to prove their social standing by making it apparent that they could spend a year in Europe without having any concerns about the expenses. Therefore one can see that by having a connection to Europe they can establish themselves as a prominent couple that can be seen as a part of the leisure class. Hence the aspect of location becomes very central in their way towards proclaiming their place in this class.

In *The Great Gatsby* there is a contrast between the prosperous life of the leisure class that we see in the characters such as Gatsby and those less fortunate. The place where one finds these less fortunate people is the Valley of Ashes. The people that inhabit this area of New York are not a part of the social class that has been discussed so far. It is in The Valley of Ashes where we find the characters Myrtle and George. The Valley of Ashes is depicted in quite a grim way as a place that no one would ever want to live, a stark contrast to the glittering mansions of Long Island:

This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-
grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. (Fitzgerald 29)

This is how Nick describes the location the first time The Valley of Ashes is mentioned in the novel as he and Tom are making their way to Tom’s mistress, Myrtle. George and Myrtle are two characters that represent another life, a life that is completely different to the life of the leisure class.

The characters previously examined all use the aspect of location to elevate their social status but here one can see how location is something that can be used against Myrtle and George and their desire to improve their situation. Having a home in the Valley of Ashes is not something Myrtle and George can use to obtain a place in the higher social classes. Consequently, they have to use other methods to get what they want when location is something that can be held against them in their endeavor to elevate themselves. Through marrying George, Myrtle thought that she could solve her problem of being a part of the lower classes. She believed him to be a different man than the one he turned out to be, she believed he was a man that could elevate her to a higher level of social status. As she quite bitterly points out in the statement “I married him because I thought he was a gentleman, she said finally. I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe.” (Fitzgerald 41). This quote indicates that Myrtle was in search of a way of rising up to more esteemed circles, even though she did not have the so-called ‘breeding’ for it. But she was mistaken and now they are living in a place which is a symbol of their lack of wealth and class. Anyone of importance would not degrade themselves by living in such a place, which has the implication that it is almost impossible for them to improve their situation. As their home becomes a symbol for their lack of means, the aspect of location defines them as well as Gatsby’s home defines him and his role in society. Since they represent the lower class they function to express what Jerry Carrier defines as the basis of class: “You can only have a king if you have many peasants. You can only have the super-rich if you have many who are poor. And these fundamentals are the basis of class.” (Carrier 235). The fact that the aspect of location will never be something that they can use for their advantage means that Myrtle and George have to find another way of elevating themselves in class.

In a novel where location is very central in securing one’s place in the higher classes one can now see an example of where location works against two characters. George does what he can to make his business as much of a success it can be, although the garage is described as a place with “interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner” (Fitzgerald 30). Through this quote one can see that his business is not doing that well and he makes it clear in the way he answers Tom about the business where his reply is described as being unconvincing. “Hello, Wilson, old man, said Tom, slapping him jovially on the shoulder. How’s business? I can’t complain, answered Wilson unconvincingly. When are you going to sell me that car?” (31). This implies that the business is not doing well and that George
lacks the resources to make the garage more prosperous and with a nice interior. Seeing that the garage is located in the Valley of Ashes the garage was never going to be a place where the clientele of the higher classes would visit. Yet he does not do much to make a change. As Tyson points out in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* the development of their story makes us sympathize with George but it is weakened by his failings as a person. Thus instead of getting angry at the class oppression, the system, we get irritated by George’s lack of character, his inability to make something out of himself in this capitalist America: “…we blame the victim instead of the system that victimizes him.” (Tyson 76). Nevertheless George is defined by the location and furthermore it prevents him to make the business more of a success since the location limits him to a certain kind of people that maybe cannot afford the service.

One can find further examples of Myrtle attempting to rise in social status despite the fact that location works against her. For instance Myrtle in a way sells her body as a means to lure Tom into marrying her and hence elevate herself to a higher level in society. By having an affair with him she can have material things, gifts, from Tom, which her husband cannot afford to give her. In addition to that it would seem that Myrtle also receives some kind of respect or esteem by being the wealthy and powerful mistress of Tom Buchanan. Tom Buchanan’s social power has an effect on Myrtle’s acquaintances as they praise her person and her choice of clothing, although she would be looked down upon by women from the same strata as Daisy (Fitzgerald 37). This shows that she using Tom’s social standing to get away from her own dreary life with a husband she cannot stand. Yet her sister’s depiction of the relationship between Tom and Myrtle suggests that Myrtle believes that in the future she will become Mrs. Buchanan.

You see, cried Catherine triumphantly. She lowered her voice again. It is really the wife that’s keeping them apart. She is a Catholic, and they don’t believe in divorce. Daisy was not a Catholic, and I was a little shocked at the elaborateness of the lie. (Fitzgerald 39-40)

Thus one can suspect that Tom has been deceitful and promised Myrtle that he would leave his wife for her, if he only could do so. Furthermore Myrtle is seemingly convinced that he will and they will get married and move West until everything settles down. The fact that she believes the plan is for them to move West indicates that Tom was lying all along. Because of all Tom has done to be seen as a member of the leisure class of the East it seems unlikely for him to move back to the West and leave it all behind. Moreover Tom would be severely looked down upon by society if he would marry a person like Myrtle. This is most likely why Myrtle believes that they would be moving West where they might not be as disdained as they would be in the East. However if one looks back on Tom’s way of being and his previous actions this would prove to be very unlikely. He is a collector he has a need for owning as much as he can in order to prove his worth and power and Myrtle is just an item on the list of his possessions. Mary McAleer Balkun refers to collecting in the novel as being
a “defining activity” in her book *The American Counterfeit* (132). The men in the novel are prone to be collecting things, Tom with his houses, horses and women and Gatsby with his numerous possessions, one of them being his mansion. Hence one can assume that even though Myrtle believes there is a deeper connection them but she is just one of Tom’s possessions. Since Myrtle does not have the means to have possessions like the men in the novel she markets the only thing she has, her body. Thus her attempts to rise in social standing differs quite substantially from for instance Daisy and more so from the men in the novel. Just as her husband she is defined by the location in which she lives and it ultimately prevents her from elevating her social standing as she still is seen as a lower-class woman who will never be as refined as Daisy.

In conclusion, despite the fact that *The Great Gatsby* is set in the East, it is mostly a story of the Midwest, the Midwesterners leaving their home in aspiration of becoming something great. As they leave the West the main characters step into a world where class, money and power is everything and to be a part of the leisure class of New York City a substantial amount of money is necessary. Furthermore it becomes apparent that in order to elevate their social standing the aspect of location is very central in the novel. The characters use the houses they have bought for themselves in the most exclusive areas of New York in order to advance themselves in society and to serve as symbols of their wealth. But moreover it is also a way for the characters to show their social standing, to make it apparent that they are members of the leisure class. Since Gatsby, Nick, Tom and Daisy all are from the Midwest they use locations in the most exclusive parts of New York to establish themselves as people with wealth, power and social status in the eyes of the Easterners. Even though the characters’ reasons for obtaining a higher social status might differ they all desire a high social standing in the East. Nick desires a life away from the Midwest and finds himself on West Egg enjoying the life of the leisure class more and more as time passes. Gatsby’s motive is to obtain a certain social status and wealth partly to be seen as man of consequence but moreover to be noticed by Daisy, the woman he loves. Tom and Daisy’s objective is to live a life in leisure and to surround themselves with possessions to be seen as Easterners and not as two people with wealth from the Midwest. All these characters use location to achieve their ambitions and motives. The characters’ feelings and other emotions consequently become unessential and making money and being someone of importance is all that matters, to rid themselves of the place where they were born.

Even though location can be used by some characters to advance themselves in society, for two characters location works against them. In Fitzgerald’s portrayal of the leisure class the characters Myrtle and George are vital in depicting the class system in *The Great Gatsby*. For Myrtle and George location, instead of being used as way to display their status, is something that can be held against them in their efforts to rise from their place in the lower class. As they inhabit the least desirable location in the novel, the Valley of Ashes, the location can be used by others as a way to
keep them in their place. To tell the story of the Midwesterners’ attempts of becoming members of
the leisure class one has to incorporate the other side, those who are less fortunate. Myrtle and
George are depicted in the novel as a stereotypical couple from the lower-class, as George is for
instance described as not very bright. In this way, Fitzgerald draws a distinct line between the
Midwesterners who are seen as intelligent people with a possibility of becoming great and Myrtle
and George. Placing them in the most run-down area makes it impossible for them to be seen as
anything other than two people from the Valley of Ashes, a location they cannot use for their
advantage but instead can be held against them. Due to this they have to find other ways to rise from
their situation. Myrtle markets herself as she becomes Tom Buchanan’s mistress and George is
unsuccessful in his attempts of building a prosperous business.

Thus it is apparent throughout the novel that in The Great Gatsby the characters have to live in a
proper area that truly reflects their social standing in order to become a part of the leisure class in
the East. Yet the method of using location to elevate their social status is evidently only available
for those who already have a substantial amount of money. Characters from the lower-class areas
have to use other methods to obtain what they want. Even though the Midwestern characters succeed
in their ambition to secure a place in the leisure class, it becomes apparent that their efforts ultimately
are in vain. As the novel ends we learn that their time in the East were limited and in the end they
either die or leave for the West. As the story began with four characters making their way from the
Midwest for a life in New York City’s leisure class, it ends with Nick returning to the place they all
once called home.
Works Cited

Primary Source:

Secondary Sources: