HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2026, 10(9), 1151-1155
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

The Changing Meaning of the Green Light in *The Great Gatsby*: Distance, Disenchantment, and Nick Carraway's Retrospective Narration

Wenhao Qi*, Haoxi Lv

College of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266590, Shandong, China.

How to cite this paper: Wenhao Qi, Haoxi Lv. (2026) The Changing Meaning of the Green Light in *The Great Gatsby*: Distance, Disenchantment, and Nick Carraway's Retrospective Narration. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 10(9), 1151-1155.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2026.09.018

Received: July 28, 2026
Accepted: August 25, 2026
Published: September 23, 2026

***Corresponding author:** Wenhao Qi, College of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266590, Shandong, China.

© 2026 by the author(s).
This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND) license, which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not modified or adapted.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Abstract

The green light in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has usually been widely understood as a symbol of Gatsby's hope, his desire for Daisy, or the American Dream, and these interpretations are persuasive because each of them points to an especially important part of the novel. However, they may also make the light appear to carry the same meaning consistently from beginning to end. Far from remaining fixed, its meaning clearly shifts as Gatsby's relationship with Daisy changes and as Nick Carraway later looks back on the events. The discussion follows three related stages: at first, physical, social, and temporal distance allow Gatsby to project an ideal future onto the light; after his reunion with Daisy, proximity gradually weakens its colossal significance by exposing the difference between the desired object and the desire constructed around it; finally, after Gatsby's death, Nick connects this private image with the historical dream of the New World. In this way, the light ultimately becomes a broader image of American aspiration while still retaining the knowledge of failure. By considering spatial distance together with Nick's retrospective narration, the green light is not a fixed symbol but one whose meaning is created, weakened, and broadened gradually as the story develops.

Keywords

The Great Gatsby; green light; Nick Carraway; narrative distance; American Dream

1. Introduction

Among the images in twentieth-century American fiction, the green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock is one of the most familiar, for although it appears only at several important moments in *The Great Gatsby*, it has gradually come to represent the novel as a whole. Early criticism established its connection with Gatsby's longing and with the American Dream. Bewley (1954), for example, regards the light as a central symbol through which Daisy becomes part of Gatsby's larger vision, while later studies connect Gatsby's personal ambition with national myths of self-making, social mobility, and the "pursuit of happiness" (Decker, 1994; Callahan, 1996). These readings explain why the light is important, yet they may also leave the impression that its significance remains stable from the beginning of the novel to the end.

Previous studies provide three contexts for this reading. Wijitsopon (2022) and Elmore (1970) show that color symbolism emerges through textual patterns rather than a fixed code, while studies of the American Dream connect Gatsby's aspiration with money, class, and national mythology (Callahan, 1996; Al-Omoush, 2022). Research on

Nick also distinguishes his participation in events from his later retrospective narration (O'Rourke, 1982; Preston, 1997; Ascher, 2021; Yan & Ren, 2003). Together, these perspectives help explain how distance and retrospective narration reshape the green light.

The novel itself, however, presents a more changeable process. When Nick first notices the light, it is "minute and far away" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 64); when Gatsby finally stands near Daisy, it loses the meaning it once possessed and becomes "again a green light on a dock" (p. 115); only in the final paragraphs, after Gatsby has died, does Nick describe it as the "orgastic future" that recedes before a collective human pursuit (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 176). Rather than repeating one fixed symbol, these three moments form a sequence in which distance creates symbolic value, proximity reveals its limits, and retrospective narration provides a wider but also more uncertain meaning.

Accordingly, the question is how the meaning of the green light changes across the novel and why Nick's position is important to that change. It examines three stages—distance and projection, proximity and disenchantment, and Nick's retrospective interpretation—through which Daisy is first turned into an imagined future, then becomes physically present and weakens the imaginative power of the distant light, and is finally placed within a wider American history of desire. This approach does not deny that the light can symbolize the American Dream; rather, it attempts to explain how the novel develops that meaning and why, at the end, hope and failure remain closely connected.

2. Distance and the Production of Desire

The first appearance of the green light occurs at the end of Chapter 1. Nick has returned from dinner at the Buchanans' house and sees Gatsby standing outside his mansion. Gatsby does not know that he is being watched. He stretches his arms "toward the dark water" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 64), and Nick believes that he is trembling. Looking in the same direction, Nick can distinguish "nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 64). At this point, neither Daisy nor her dock is named. The reader sees a bodily gesture and a distant point of light before learning the story that joins them.

This order is important. The light first appears as an unanswered visual detail. Its smallness leaves much of the scene in darkness, and its distance prevents Nick from seeing the object clearly. Yet that lack of information does not make the image empty. It makes interpretation necessary. Westbrook (1960) observes that the novel is organized through Nick's gradual growth of awareness, and the scene places the reader within that incomplete awareness. Nick knows Daisy and has just visited her house, but he does not yet understand Gatsby's connection with her. The reader therefore encounters the image before learning the story that gives it symbolic meaning.

The scene organizes Gatsby's desire through three connected forms of distance: physical, social, and temporal. Physically, the bay separates Gatsby's lawn from Daisy's dock, while socially the same water lies between West Egg and East Egg; Gatsby's mansion displays enormous wealth, but its location still marks him as one of the newly rich, whereas Daisy belongs to the inherited privilege of East Egg. As Cheng (2009) argues, the geographical contrast between the two Eggs expresses a difference in social space. Gatsby can purchase a mansion opposite Daisy's home, but he cannot purchase the history, security, and recognition represented by her world, and the light consequently gives his desire a visible direction while continually reminding him that he remains outside.

The third distance is temporal. Gatsby is not simply reaching toward the woman living across the bay in 1922. He is reaching toward the Daisy he knew five years earlier, and toward the self he imagines he was with her. His wish to "repeat the past" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 127) turns memory into a future project. Seen from afar, Daisy remains insulated from the ordinary details of present life; for this reason, the light can join past and future because it reveals almost nothing about the present. Gatsby is free to invest the light with qualities that the actual woman may not possess.

In this sense, the light does not simply represent a dream that already exists, because distance itself helps to produce that dream: the less Gatsby can see, the more he can imagine. Bewley (1954) is therefore right to locate something beyond Daisy in Gatsby's desire. Gatsby wants Daisy not only as an individual person but also as evidence that his invented identity, accumulated wealth, and years of waiting can finally be justified, and, as Decker (1994) suggests, this desire also draws upon the cultural figure of the self-made man. The green light gathers these wishes together, although they do not fully agree with one another, and appears to promise love, social acceptance, personal success, and recovery of the past at the same time.

Yet the scene reaches the reader through Nick's later account. The younger Nick sees only a strange gesture and a distant light, while the older Nick knows the history behind them. Yan and Ren's (2003) distinction between the experiencing self and the narrating self helps to explain this difference: The first-person narrator's vision constantly

alternates between "retrospectively recalling the past" and "experiencing events as they unfold," and between "occupying the center" and "retreating to the periphery," thereby splitting the narrator into a doubled self: the narrating self and the experiencing self. Retrospective interpretation, here, refers to the narrator's act of giving an earlier image a wider meaning after he knows how the story ends. Nick recreates his earlier lack of knowledge but selects details that become important after the reader learns Gatsby's story. The phrase "minute and far away" therefore carries a double valence: it is at once a faithful description of the scene before his eyes and an intimation of what the older Nick has since come to understand—that Gatsby's goal seemed near enough to steer by, yet was in fact trivial, remote, and unattainable; it presents the same scene from two positions in time. For Gatsby, the light points forward; for the narrating Nick, it also points toward the failure he already knows.

3. Proximity and Disenchantment

The second decisive moment comes in Chapter 5, after Nick arranges the reunion between Gatsby and Daisy. The meeting initially seems to fulfill Gatsby's long preparation. He takes Daisy through his mansion, displays his rooms and possessions, and watches her emotional response to his shirts. Rain gives way to sunlight, and for a short time the scene resembles the completion of his dream. Yet the green light changes at the very moment when fulfillment seems possible.

Gatsby points out that Daisy always has a green light burning at the end of her dock, after which Nick reflects that "the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 115). Across the great distance it had seemed almost to touch Daisy, but now that she stands beside him, it is "again a green light on a dock," and Gatsby's "count of enchanted objects" has decreased by one (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 115). Fitzgerald does not suggest that the light itself disappears; its physical existence continues, while the meaning Gatsby has placed upon it is reduced. Disenchantment, in this passage, does not mean that Gatsby stops desiring Daisy, but that the distant sign loses part of its symbolic magic once Daisy is present.

The difference between the physical object and its symbolic meaning is important. Gatsby has spent years organizing his desire around Daisy's absence. The light was powerful because it stood in for Daisy without revealing the difference between the real woman and Gatsby's idea of her. Once Daisy is physically present, the light is no longer needed in the same way. Her presence also creates a new problem: the actual Daisy must now be compared with an image formed through memory, waiting, and fantasy. Nick observes that Daisy sometimes "tumbled short of his dreams," not through her own fault, but because Gatsby's illusion had grown beyond her (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 117). Proximity therefore causes disenchantment not because Daisy immediately rejects Gatsby, but because no real person can fully match the ideal he has created. Castelli (2023) similarly argues that Daisy's presence causes the green light to lose its symbolic purpose because the reality before Gatsby cannot equal the image he has sustained through memory.

The episode also complicates a simple opposition between hope and failure. On the surface, Gatsby temporarily obtains what he has pursued—he meets Daisy, renews their intimacy, and brings her into the world he has built. Yet this achievement reduces rather than confirms the power of the light. The pattern supports Callahan's (1996) account of Fitzgerald's connected oppositions between success and failure, and between dream and disillusion. The light is not merely a symbol of his desire but its enabling condition: Gatsby's desire has been sustained by distance, and proximity, by removing that distance, removes the structure on which the desire depends. Success thus already contains the beginning of failure. His later demand that Daisy declare she never loved Tom further shows that reunion alone cannot satisfy him, for he wants not only her present affection but also the removal of the years separating past and present; in effect, he asks Daisy to erase part of her own history. Because that is something no person can do, the dissatisfaction is not an accident that befalls success from without; it is written into the structure of the desire that success was supposed to complete. Therefore, hope and failure are not successive poles but two faces of a single event, and Gatsby fulfils his dream precisely at the point where he removes the condition on which it depended.

Social distance also survives physical proximity. Daisy can enter Gatsby's mansion, admire his wealth, and participate in his romance, but Gatsby cannot make the difference between their social worlds disappear. Her voice is "full of money" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 133), a phrase that joins personal attraction to inherited privilege. Cain (2020) emphasizes that the novel's American Dream is limited by economic inequality, while Cheng (2009) shows that Gatsby's altered physical surroundings do not provide entry into Daisy's social space. The reunion crosses the bay, but it does not abolish the boundary represented by the bay.

Nick's narration is again important. The statement that the light's significance has vanished is Nick's interpretation, not Gatsby's direct speech. Nick writes, "Possibly it had occurred to him," which shows that he is making an inference rather than reporting Gatsby's mind with certainty (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 115). Zhuang (2006) draws attention to Nick's tendency to select and romanticize parts of Gatsby's story, although it would be too strong to treat every inference as a deliberate distortion. Here Nick turns a possible change in Gatsby's response into a more general observation: an imagined object may lose some of its attraction when it becomes available. The passage may describe Gatsby's disappointment, but it also shows the older Nick arranging the event in a way that prepares for the novel's ending.

4. From Gatsby's Private Dream to a Broader Human Longing

The significance of the green light changes again after Gatsby's death. At the beginning of the novel, the light is closely associated with Gatsby's private desire for Daisy. By the final chapter, however, Nick connects it with a broader history of aspiration. Sitting on Gatsby's beach before leaving the East, he imagines the Dutch sailors seeing the island as "a fresh, green breast of the new world" and confronting something equal to their "capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 176). He then returns to Gatsby and writes, "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (p. 176). The private image is now placed beside a national story of beginnings and expectations.

Nick's position as both a participant and a later narrator is essential to this change. The younger Nick saw Gatsby reaching toward a distant light without understanding the gesture, whereas the older Nick tells the story after learning Gatsby's history, witnessing his death, and deciding to leave the East; Yan and Ren's (2003) distinction between the experiencing self and the narrating self helps explain this difference in knowledge. The final meaning of the light was not simply present from the beginning but is produced when Nick looks back and connects the earlier image with later events that have given it a new weight, and thereby grants a private object a significance it did not yet possess.

The progression of pronouns in the final paragraph provides direct textual evidence for this widening movement. The sentence begins with "Gatsby," but the desired future soon "recedes before us." Nick continues, "It eluded us then," before asserting that "we will run faster" and "stretch out our arms farther" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 176). The movement from Gatsby to "us" and "we" transfers his reaching gesture to a collective subject. What first appeared to be Daisy's light at the end of one dock becomes an image of a future that people continue to pursue.

This wider meaning does not turn the light into a simple symbol of hope. The future remains attractive, but it recedes as people move toward it. The final sentence intensifies the contradiction: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2007, p. 176). Forward effort and backward movement occur at the same time. As Cain (2020) notes, the ending is filled with both loss and longing. Gatsby's dream fails at the level of plot, yet the desire that produced it does not disappear with his death.

Nick's broader interpretation also requires caution. Decker (1994) argues that the conclusion moves attention away from the questionable means by which Gatsby made his fortune and connects his hope with the Dutch sailors' vision of the New World. Nick therefore makes Gatsby's aspiration appear purer than Gatsby's career actually was. Zhuang (2006) likewise draws attention to Nick's tendency to filter Gatsby through his own emotional and moral response. This does not mean that Nick's final interpretation must be rejected. It means that the movement from one person's dream to a shared American aspiration results from Nick's interpretation, rather than being a neutral summary of facts.

Nick also has a personal reason to make Gatsby's story meaningful. Ascher (2021) connects Nick's relationship with Gatsby to his recovery of direction and of a sense of life's promise. Nick is mourning Gatsby, but he is also trying to understand his own disappointment with the East. By placing Gatsby within a larger pattern of aspiration, he prevents the summer from ending as a story of crime, carelessness, and death alone. His final language preserves the value of Gatsby's capacity to hope without proving that the particular dream was achievable.

The final light is therefore broader in meaning, but it is neither fixed nor uncomplicated, for it brings together Daisy and the past, wealth and social arrival, national promise and historical loss. Nor does the final chapter cancel the disenchantment of Chapter 5: readers still know that the light's colossal significance diminished when Gatsby came close to Daisy, and when Nick gives the image a wider meaning after Gatsby's death, that meaning retains the memory of failure. The symbol consequently develops through personal desire, attempted fulfilment, and collective longing instead of carrying one unchanged meaning throughout the novel.

5. Conclusion

The green light does not carry one unchanged meaning throughout *The Great Gatsby*. Its significance develops through three narrative stages. At first, physical, social, and temporal distance allow Gatsby to project love, status, self-invention, and a recoverable past onto a small point of light. After the reunion, Daisy's presence weakens the light's enchantment. The object remains, but its former symbolic power diminishes because the distance that sustained Gatsby's idealization has partly disappeared.

After Gatsby's death, Nick places the light within a broader history of aspiration. His movement from "Gatsby" to "us" and "we" turns a private longing into a collective one. Yet this final enlargement does not erase failure: the future continues to recede, and the boats are carried back toward the past. Nick's retrospective narration therefore preserves Gatsby's capacity to hope while acknowledging that his particular attempt to recover the past cannot succeed.

Reading the green light as a changing symbol avoids reducing it to a fixed code in which green simply means hope, money, or jealousy, and it also avoids the equally simple conclusion that the American Dream is either completely alive or completely dead. Distance gives the light its early meaning, proximity weakens that meaning, and Nick's later narration provides a wider but more uncertain significance. The image remains powerful precisely because aspiration and failure continue to exist together.

References

Al-Omoush, I. B. (2022). Dystopian and utopian parallels in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation and Literary Studies*, *6*(2), 189-195.

Ascher, A. (2021). Nick Carraway as Telemachus: Homeric influences and narrative bias in *The Great Gatsby*. *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, *19*, 203-221.

Bewley, M. (1954). Scott Fitzgerald's criticism of America. *The Sewanee Review*, *62*(2), 223-246.

Cain, W. E. (2020). American dreaming: Really reading *The Great Gatsby*. *Society*, *57*, 453-470.

Callahan, J. F. (1996). F. Scott Fitzgerald's evolving American Dream: The "pursuit of happiness" in *Gatsby, Tender Is the Night, and The Last Tycoon*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, *42*(3), 374-395.

Castelli, A. (2023). Beauty against the grain: *The Great Gatsby*. *Moderna Språk*, *117*(3), 142-154.

Cheng, X. (2009). Lun Liaobuqi de Gaicibi de kongjian xushi [On the spatial narrative of *The Great Gatsby*]. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, (11), 28-32.

Decker, J. L. (1994). Gatsby's pristine dream: The diminishment of the self-made man in the tribal twenties. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, *28*(1), 52-71.

Elmore, A. E. (1970). Color and cosmos in *The Great Gatsby*. *The Sewanee Review*, *78*(3), 427-443.

Fitzgerald, F. S. (2007). *The Great Gatsby* (M. Nowlin, Ed.). Broadview Press. (Original work published 1925)

O'Rourke, D. (1982). Nick Carraway as narrator in *The Great Gatsby*. *The International Fiction Review*, *9*(1), 56-60.

Preston, E. (1997). Implying authors in *The Great Gatsby*. *Narrative*, *5*(2), 143-164.

Westbrook, J. S. (1960). Nature and optics in *The Great Gatsby*. *American Literature*, *32*(1), 78-84.

Wijitsopon, R. (2022). Corpus stylistics and colour symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* and its Thai translations. *Language and Literature*, *31*(3), 267-295.

Yan, Q., & Ren, H. (2003). Lun Liaobuqi de Gaicibi de shijiao moshi [On the focalization pattern in *The Great Gatsby*]. *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, *19*(2), 60-64.

Zhuang, Y. (2006). Shilun Darenwu Gaicibi zhong Nike de xushi lunli [On Nick's narrative ethics in *The Great Gatsby*]. *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Science)*, (4), 52-56.