

"When Gangster Eyes Are Smiling":  
Reading and Teaching *The Great Gatsby* as a Gangster Novel

The gangster's smile is perhaps his most dangerous weapon. In a review of *American Gangster*, released in 2007, a film critic for *Time Out London*, Jonathan Crocker commended Denzel Washington's performance of black gangster Frank Lucas as balancing "that dangerous, easy charm hovering between a luxury smile or blazing violence." Thirty-nine years earlier in the Italian-American gangster novel, *The Godfather*, Mario Puzo creates for Vito Corleone a "chilling smile," a metonym that marks the start of Vito's transformation from small-time immigrant neighborhood criminal to dangerous mafia don, the very smile that gives Don Fanucci pause before extorting him, and the very smile that persuades the partners who will soon become his *caporegimes*, Tessio and Clemenza, to acquiesce to his plan to deal with Fanucci, for "at that time, Vito Corelone did not know the effect of this smile" (206). This smile is inherited by the son who will succeed him as don: "Michael without knowing he did so smiled. It was in some strange way a chilling smile" (351). Thirty-seven years earlier in *Payoff*, a novel serialized in 1932 in *The Saturday Evening Post*—seven years after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*—, Charles Francis Coe's narrator describes racketeer Cut Cardozzi's "personal magnetism" in language echoing Nick Carraway's observations of Jay Gatsby's magnetic and charming "personality." In *Payoff*, "The gleam in [Cardozzi's] eye and the breadth of his smile were attractive. The gusto with which he did every little thing was almost magnificent.' His smile, according to the narrator, 'is worth a million dollars.'" (Coe quoted in Ruth 78).

While Nick never describes Gatsby's smile as being "worth a million dollars," Cardozzi's magnificence echoes Gatsby's greatness, and Cardozzi's smile, like Gatsby's, is nevertheless the major component of his attractiveness. On several occasions that mark stages of the narrator, Nick Carraway's, acquaintance with Jay Gatsby, and in his retrospective imaginings of a young Gatsby envisioning his future self, Nick Carraway fixates on Gatsby's charming smile, "one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life." (Fitzgerald 48). Gatsby's gangster smile is one significant part of what makes him what David Ruth refers to, in a chapter from *Inventing the Public Enemy* titled "Dressed to Kill," a "smooth criminal" an "invented gangster" in pursuit of far more than love, but of what I and my students refer to as the "gangster's American Dream." The gangster's smile, and Gatsby's smile by comparison, is part of "That smooth exterior, the gangster suggested, [that] could be a powerful tool for deceit. Walter Davenport's description of a young robber's smile that 'disarmed' reflected a common theme in portrayals of criminals" by the media (Ruth 79). Gatsby's smile is part of the deceptive "smooth exterior" of his "personality," that "unbroken series of successful gestures" that determine his success as a gangster (Fitzgerald 6), for also, as Ruth's notion of the "invented gangster" suggests, the disarming deception of the "invented gangster" is successful if the self he invents successfully covers what he wants to hide—his socio-economic origins, ethnicity, and gangster identity.

Part of the smooth exterior is, of course, that Gatsby is white: Gatsby is an un-racialized "white" gangster working with and among ethnic Prohibition gangsters and white Wall Street bankers, brokers, and government officials: as such, he is an invisible as a gangster (though he is not quite so invisible in his claims to inherited wealth and an old moneyed family).

In creating the character of Jay Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald created the first literary gangster. As such, Gatsby's smile becomes the first gangster smile, an attractive and disarming smile that Gatsby learns to use as a weapon to disarm the people who will help him climb the crooked

ladder as a gangster. Gatsby's smile disarms the narrator of his life story, Nick Carraway, and in doing so contributes to Nick's unreliability by charming Nick (as well as decades of readers) into romanticizing Gatsby as a lovelorn, tragic and heroic victim of a failed American Dream. For Gatsby can be and perhaps even remains all of these identities: tragic figure, victim, lover, Horatio Alger figure—but the overly sentimental reading that idealizes and romanticizes Gatsby, even as it occasionally doubts and disapproves, falls short and remains stuck in cliché and misreading unless it factors in Gatsby's gangster identity—no easy interpretation as the gangster figure is more enigmatic than clichéd and stereotyped portrayals give him credit for. What has been the conventional, romanticized misreading overshadows a more compelling and complex reading of Gatsby as a real gangster (not just a front man for Meyer Wolfsheim's syndicate and a small-time bootlegger and Wall Street swindler), and of the novel not only as the first literary gangster novel that we can realize as even more artfully and complexly crafted, further securing its place in the American Literature and modernist canons.