November 10, 2025

From Dust to Divinity

I don't happen to own a Grecian urn, but I'm pretty sure that British romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) is correct about the scenes that might be depicted on it if I did own one. If my Grecian urn happened to be very old and a true work of art, it might perfectly capture the lives of people in a small town, the sacrifice of a heifer, a lover pursuing his beloved, stately trees in their prime, and a flutist playing the most incredibly beautiful music. That's the thing, Keats suggests in "Ode on a Grecian Urn": As long as these scenes reside only on the Grecian urn, the work of art, they can be perfect and timeless. The trees will never lose their leaves, the lover will never lose his beloved, and "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (lines 11–12). They do not play for the "sensual ear," but "Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone" (14). Unheard music is superior to heard music because it "pipes to the spirit"!

I thought about "Ode on a Grecian Urn" because the November selection for my Classics Book Club is Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* published in 1925, a century ago. Both the speaker of the Keats poem and Fitzgerald's character, Jay Gatsby, long for an ideal that is fundamentally incompatible with actual human existence.

As you probably know, Jay Gatsby loved Daisy Fay Buchanan and tried to recover the love he had lost five years earlier. WWI had intervened, but Gatsby's social class had never been comparable to Daisy's anyway, and Daisy married Tom Buchanan. After the war, Gatsby became fabulously wealthy (by illicit means), but he always felt committed to Daisy. He threw the lavish West Egg parties, not because he enjoyed them or cared about the people who attended

them, but because he thought of them as a means of recovering his dream of Daisy, who lived just across the bay in East Egg.

According to narrator Nick Carraway, a basic problem existed, even when Gatsby and Daisy were in love five years earlier. Gatsby must have known, Carraway suspects, even when Gatsby kissed Daisy for the first time, that when he connected his "unutterable vision" with "her perishable breath, his mind would never again romp like the mind of God" (100). (Did you ever think of God's mind romping?) The character Jay Gatsby had a love and a dream that went far beyond the actual, flesh-and-blood Daisy.

Indeed, Gatsby was inevitably disappointed. West Egg money would never match East Egg social status, and Daisy, one of the "careless people," was unworthy of Gatsby's absolute devotion. When confronted, Daisy could acknowledge that although she had loved her husband, she had loved Gatsby "too." That last word, "too," shocked Gatsby and propelled the affair to its ultimate, violent conclusion on an afternoon when "only the dead dream fought on" (120). Still, Carraway suggests, Gatsby "turned out all right in the end" (8), because he aimed for the ideal, unlike the careless, ultra-rich people who thoughtlessly destroyed the lives of others.
John Keats and F. Scott Fitzgerald explored the huge, unfathomable distance between the real and the ideal, between mundane, material existence and the loftiness and mystery of spirit. Christians know something about this topic, except that "mere" earthly existence is not mundane and the gulf can be bridged through our faith.

Christians know that God is perfect and all-encompassing, while we are imperfect and limited. We exist in time, while God is timeless. God is our creator and we are the created, though we are fashioned in his image. God's understanding is vast, while ours is narrow. Nevertheless, we imperfect, sinful humans may at least approach and communicate with the divine. For one thing, like Keats and Fitzgerald, we have art—their art, our own art, perhaps, but centuries of great art that helps us to fathom God.

Keats and Fitzgerald and other great artists have used symbols (such as an urn, a green light, dust, etc.) to represent the real or the ideal, and if the symbols are effective, these objects make sense on both the literal and figurative levels. We understand our God through meaningful Christian symbols, too, such as the cross, bread, wine, fish, ashes.

We grow closer to God and bridge the gap between human and divine when we strive to follow Christ's charge that we should love and care for one another; the thoroughly material contributions of money, food, clothing, and shelter can express the depth of our faith in God and our love for our fellow humans.

We also grow closer to God by means of our understanding of the Good Book, The Bible, The Word of God. Above all, our prayers are a

human means of access to God, even developing a relationship with God, who turns out not to be remote, but thoroughly accessible!

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby.* Digitized by the Internet Archive, 2020. https://archive.org/stream/greatgatsby0000unse_c4w8/greatgatsby0000unse_c4w8_djvu.txt.
Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn.

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