

Halfway between West Egg and New York City sprawls a desolate plain, a gray valley where New York's ashes are dumped. The men who live here work at shoveling up the ashes. Overhead, two huge, blue, spectacle-rimmed eyes—the last vestige of an advertising gimmick by a long-vanished eye doctor—stare down from an enormous sign. These unblinking eyes, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, watch over everything that happens in the valley of ashes.

The commuter train that runs between West Egg and New York passes through the valley, making several stops along the way. One day, as [Nick](#) and [Tom](#) are riding the train into the city, Tom forces Nick to follow him out of the train at one of these stops. Tom leads Nick to George Wilson's garage, which sits on the edge of the valley of ashes. Tom's lover [Myrtle](#) is Wilson's wife. Wilson is a lifeless yet handsome man, colored gray by the ashes in the air. In contrast, Myrtle has a kind of desperate vitality; she strikes Nick as sensuous despite her stocky figure.

Tom taunts Wilson and then orders Myrtle to follow him to the train. Tom takes Nick and Myrtle to New York City, to the Morningside Heights apartment he keeps for his affair. Here they have an impromptu party with Myrtle's sister, Catherine, and a couple named McKee. Catherine has bright red hair, wears a great deal of makeup, and tells Nick that she has heard that [Jay Gatsby](#) is the nephew or cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, the ruler of Germany during World War I. The McKees, who live downstairs, are a horrid couple: Mr. McKee is pale and feminine, and Mrs. McKee is shrill. The group proceeds to drink excessively. Nick claims that he got drunk for only the second time in his life at this party.

The ostentatious behavior and conversation of the others at the party repulse Nick, and he tries to leave. At the same time, he finds himself fascinated by the lurid spectacle of the group. Myrtle grows louder and more obnoxious the more she drinks, and shortly after Tom gives her a new puppy as a gift, she begins to talk about [Daisy](#). Tom sternly warns

her never to mention his wife. Myrtle angrily says that she will talk about whatever she chooses and begins chanting Daisy's name. Tom responds by breaking her nose, bringing the party to an abrupt halt. Nick leaves, drunkenly, with Mr. McKee, and ends up taking the 4 a.m. train back to Long Island.

Analysis

Unlike the other settings in the book, the valley of ashes is a picture of absolute desolation and poverty. It lacks a glamorous surface and lies fallow and gray halfway between West Egg and New York. The valley of ashes symbolizes the moral decay hidden by the beautiful facades of the Eggs, and suggests that beneath the ornamentation of West Egg and the mannered charm of East Egg lies the same ugliness as in the valley. The valley is created by industrial dumping and is therefore a by-product of capitalism. It is the home to the only poor characters in the novel.

The undefined significance of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's monstrous, bespectacled eyes gazing down from their billboard makes them troubling to the reader: in this chapter, Fitzgerald preserves their mystery, giving them no fixed symbolic value. Enigmatically, the eyes simply "brood on over the solemn dumping ground." Perhaps the most persuasive reading of the eyes at this point in the novel is that they represent the eyes of God, staring down at the moral decay of the 1920s. The faded paint of the eyes can be seen as symbolizing the extent to which humanity has lost its connection to God. This reading, however, is merely suggested by the arrangement of the novel's symbols; Nick does not directly explain the symbol in this way, leaving the reader to interpret it.

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The fourth and final setting of the novel, New York City, is in every way the opposite of the valley of ashes—it is loud, garish, abundant, and glittering. To Nick, New York is simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, thrillingly fast-paced and dazzling to look at but lacking a moral center. While Tom is forced to keep his affair with Myrtle relatively discreet in the valley of the ashes, in New York he can appear with her in public, even among his acquaintances, without causing a scandal. Even Nick, despite being Daisy's cousin, seems not to mind that Tom parades his infidelity in public.

The sequence of events leading up to and occurring at the party define and contrast the various characters in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick's reserved nature and indecisiveness show in the fact that though he feels morally repelled by the vulgarity and tastelessness of the party, he is too fascinated by it to leave. This contradiction suggests the ambivalence that he feels toward the Buchanans, Gatsby, and the East Coast in general. The party also underscores Tom's hypocrisy and lack of restraint: he feels no guilt for betraying Daisy with Myrtle, but he feels compelled to keep Myrtle in her place.

Tom emerges in this section as a boorish bully who uses his social status and physical strength to dominate those around him—he subtly taunts Wilson while having an affair with his wife, experiences no guilt for his immoral behavior, and does not hesitate to lash out violently in order to preserve his authority over Myrtle. Wilson stands in stark contrast, a handsome and morally upright man who lacks money, privilege, and vitality.

Fitzgerald also uses the party scene to continue building an aura of mystery and excitement around Gatsby, who has yet to make a full appearance in the novel. Here, Gatsby emerges as a mysterious subject of gossip. He is extremely well known, but no one seems to have any verifiable information about him. The ridiculous rumor Catherine

spreads shows the extent of the public's curiosity about him, rendering him more intriguing to both the other characters in the novel and the reader.