

Gatsby's Rolls-Royce: Reflections on the Automobile and Literature

Brian Pearce

Department of Drama Studies
Durban University of Technology
South Africa
BrianP@dut.ac.za

This article discusses the relationship between the automobile and literature in the early twentieth century. Beginning with a general account of the relationship between the automobile and literature, the final section focuses on a key text, *The Great Gatsby*, and its treatment of the theme of cars. The essay is discursive and does not attempt to be a definitive account of the topic, which is a vast one, but makes observations which could perhaps lead to further critical discussion. Beginning with the racing driver Sir Henry Birkin's reproaches to poets for not celebrating the heroism of motor racing, the article concludes by contrasting the idealistic notion of racing with Birkin's own death, seeing a similarity in it between Jay Gatsby's illusions relating to the automobile and his own tragic end. The article discusses how cars can symbolize human attributes and aspirations, and how they in their turn have contributed to the modern conception of tragedy.

Key words: automobile; Scott Fitzgerald; *The Great Gatsby*; Jazz Age; modernity; tragedy

Introduction

Sir Henry Birkin, in his autobiography, *Full Throttle*, asks the question why 'no one has manufactured an epic out of a motor race; few have so much as drawn from it for simile'¹ Of the Le Mans motor race which produced the Bentley conquests of the 1920s, he asks, 'Why has nobody woven that wonderful story into a poem, when the cars raced all through the night, and crowds slept in the glare of the headlights, under the trees that line the road?' (1932, 23). He sees the Bentley triumph as a national one, to do with 'the triumph of British industry', and believes that it is the Poet

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Laureate's duty to write about such events. Birkin was, of course, one of the famous 'Bentley Boys', and continued racing his supercharged 4 ½ litre Bentley after the demise of the original Bentley company in 1931. He writes, 'perhaps aesthetic minds shrink from motor racing, and think it a trifle too vulgar, or a great deal too noisy for their taste', and he adds: 'It is nonetheless lamentable, that the honour of great verse should be withheld from a subject that so merits and suits it, and that the labour and genius involved in a racing car should be without classic praise'. He goes on to say that Shakespeare, 'who was not untainted with vulgarity', had he lived now, might have written, 'I see you stand like Bentleys in the pits, / Straining upon the start' (p. 24). Nevertheless, language was changing radically as a result of the automobile, and twentieth century literature was becoming increasingly dependent on the language of the new mechanical age.

The automobile had a dramatic impact on literature because it fundamentally altered man's perception of reality. Space and time, these closely linked phenomena, were radically changed in the perception of writers because of the speed with which distances could be traversed and the flexibility which motor transport provided. In discussing E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910), Andrew Thacker writes, 'Forster's novel depicts a world where the invention of the internal combustion engine at the end of the previous century resulted in far-reaching changes in the human experience of basic categories of time and space' (2000, 39). Timo Lothman and Antje Schumacher make a similar point: 'After the locomotive revolution in the nineteenth century, the automobile enabled an individualisation of experiencing – and conquering – time and space' (2013, 213). Trains could only travel where railways had been built, but the automobile could use existing roads and tracks, and could sometimes ride over uncharted terrain. The automobile was not tied to schedules imposed by external authorities. Another factor is that a car could belong to an individual person. It was an asset or a form of private property. It could be a source of pride, and could express individual aspirations: it was therefore potentially a symbol for the person who owned it. In the early years of the twentieth century, writers were often interested in the automobile or were themselves motoring enthusiasts; this interest is reflected, for example, in the writings of George Bernard Shaw and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In *Man and Superman* (1903), Shaw manages to bring a car on stage, probably for the first time in theatre history – later he contrived to introduce an aeroplane, in *Misalliance* (1910), when the sound is heard, just off stage, of an aircraft crashing into the greenhouse. For an audience, this is the closest thing to the crash actually happening on stage.

Another writer from the early period of motoring who was interested in cars was Henry James. He was not a driver himself, but enjoyed many motoring trips in Edith Wharton's automobiles, trips which had an influence on his tale 'The Velvet Glove' (1909), as Alicia Rix has demonstrated (2013, 31–49). Miranda Seymour writes that the actual friendship between James and Wharton was, arguably, closely linked to

the automobile: ‘Cynicism is tempting: would he have been as fond a friend if Edith had not been so ready to put her succession of splendid cars so unflinchingly at his disposal?’ ([1988] 2004, 240).

The internal combustion engine, which made motoring possible, also led to the development of other forms of transport such as the motorbike, the motor boat and the aeroplane. Any discussion of the automobile in literature must bear in mind the close relationship between these various forms of transport in the machine age. Motor cars were more closely linked to motor cycles than they are today, because motorcycles were often fitted with sidecars and thus became small passenger-carrying vehicles. There were also three-wheeler cycle cars made by manufacturers like Morgan and B.S.A., and it was not uncommon, up until the 1930s, for motorbikes and sidecars, cycle cars and light cars to compete in the same races.

Many automobile pioneers were also aircraft pioneers. One such was Charles S. Rolls (1877–1910), who in fact died in an aircraft accident. Many of the designers associated with the aeroplane, such as Gabriel Voisin (1880–1973), or aeroplane engines, such as W. O. Bentley (1888–1971) and Marc Birgikt (1878–1953), were also famous automobile designers. Meanwhile, automobile manufacturers like Rolls-Royce became the leading manufacturers of aircraft engines.

Motor cars at first frightened horses and were considered to be dangerous to other road users, so that in Britain a law persisted until 1896 that any self-propelled vehicle had to be preceded by a man walking in front carrying a red flag (Stein [1961] 1968, 25). Soon it was realized that the automobile was not only a danger to others but also to the very drivers and passengers themselves. A number of motoring pioneers were killed in motoring accidents – Marcel Renault, for example, died in the Paris-Bordeaux Motor Race of 1903. Later in the century, Fred Duesenberg (1876–1932), of the Duesenberg marque, died as the result of an accident at the wheel of one of his own cars. The world of the arts was not unaffected by such tragedies. The children of Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) died in a motoring accident in Paris in 1913. Duncan herself was killed in an automobile accident in 1927 when the long scarf she was wearing became entangled in the rear wheel of an open Amilcar in which she was the passenger. T. E. Lawrence, having survived the most perilous escapades in World War I, was killed in a motorbike accident in 1935. Later in the century, James Dean (1931–1955), Roy Campbell (1901–1957) and Albert Camus (1913–1960) died in motor car accidents. The motor car had become the new demon of the gods.

Cars and criticism

Possibly the most seminal analysis of the impact of mechanization on twentieth-century art is Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Benjamin’s concern in the essay is not specifically with the automobile, but with the mechanical reproduction of art, which finds its form in the

new medium of film. However, although the automobile and its impact on modern art and life are not mentioned, they are implicit in what he says. For instance, in a note to the essay, he writes: 'The film relates to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus – changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen' ([1936] 1979, 252). There can be no doubt that the automobile fundamentally changed the nature of traffic in cities. A motor car could accelerate, brake and turn more quickly and suddenly than any horse-drawn vehicle, and the traffic in the streets of major cities must have been quite chaotic before regulations and traffic lights were brought in to control the situation. Paul Strand (1890–1976), in his photograph 'Fifth Avenue, New York 1915', gives us a vivid sense of what the traffic looked like in a large city in the early years of the century, with cars, horse drawn vehicles and pedestrians all crossing two sets of tram lines (Strand n.d., 39). Perhaps the random, surprising, improvisatory quality of modern traffic led in part to the style of music of the Jazz Age.

Frederick Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, has written about the impact of machinery on modern culture: 'It is appropriate to recall the excitement of machinery in the moment of capital preceding our own, the exhilaration of futurism, most notably, and of Marinetti's celebration of the machine gun and the motorcar' ([1991] 2003, 36). However, the excitement of machinery was soon replaced by the anonymity of mass production. Automobiles which had once been the unique creations of individual engineers and designers, soon came to resemble one another. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer remark: 'That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a keen interest in varieties' (1944] 1979, 123). Originality had given way to consumerism.

A key figure in the discussion of the relationship between the machine and modern culture, referred to by both Benjamin and Jameson, is the Italian poet Filippo Marinetti (1876–1944), who founded the Futurist movement. Marinetti wrote of 'the famished roar of automobiles' and 'the beauty of speed'. In his *Manifesto of Futurism* ([1909]), he writes: 'We want to hymn the man at the wheel, who hurls the lance of his spirit across the earth, along the circle of its orbit'.

A number of critics have written about how the culture of the automobile influenced particular writers, or literature more generally, in the twentieth century. In his article, 'The Motorcar and Desire: A Cultural and Literary Reconsideration of the Motorcar in Modernity', Paul Ryder follows Foucault's approach of employing cultural archaeology to unearth 'certain discursive formations' in order to place them in the foreground. He attempts to account for the fact that while the motor car features prominently in literature during the early part of the twentieth century, it becomes increasingly invisible as the century progresses. However, he does note that a number of later writers, such as Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and Bruce Springsteen, have acknowledged the motor car's cultural function (Ryder 2013, n.p.). Ryder

refers to Viktor Shklovsky's *Art as Technique* (1917): 'Viktor Shklovsky explains how familiarity breeds contempt or, at least, a certain indifference. He argues that the familiar becomes so familiar that we no longer see that which is before our eyes . . .' Relating this idea to the reception of the automobile, Ryder observes 'that an indubitably habitualised perception renders us blind and deaf not so much to the automobile's physical presence but to its cultural significance'. He writes that 'we no longer truly see or hear the automobile' and notes, 'the complete absence of major secondary texts that interrogate the place [of] the automobile in modern fiction'. His view is that 'when we see a thing enough times, we cease to hear or see it at all: its essence – its true meaning – is lost to us' (Ryder 2013). However, we are today perhaps re-evaluating what the motor car has meant in history for the very reason that its future seems somewhat uncertain. Faced with global warming, overpopulation and traffic congestion, public transport may become a necessary option, while motor cars may be increasingly restricted by laws relating to safety, and become simply a lot less fun to drive.

The motor car in the twenty-first century symbolizes something quite different from the automobile in the early years of the twentieth century. In his analysis of *Cosmopolis* (2003) by Don DeLillo, Ian Davidson writes about the car in that novel,

. . . stuck in a traffic jam and unable even to get across town for a 'haircut', while the passenger not only has meetings and medical check-ups in the car, but also has another 'haircut' by losing millions of dollars speculating on the yen as he uses the interactive functionality of the equipment the car contains to move money in global markets. (Davidson 2012, 470)

Davidson also discusses, 'the way the history of the car and automobility produces an object that is both a symbol of freedom and a steel and oil cage that imprisons its owner in debt and everyday drudgery' (p. 469).

Ryder comments on another aspect of the automobile's ambiguity: 'E. M. Forster and F. Scott Fitzgerald display a particularly acute perception of the motorcar's duality'. By this Ryder means that the automobile is seen both as 'a vehicle of agency and conquest', and as 'a machine of death and destruction'. He notes the similarities in Forster and Fitzgerald in this regard: 'For both authors, while the motorcar whispers of subtle arts and originality, it also bespeaks its fundamental essence as a counterfeit: a base commodity that compromises any sense of the authentic, including the natural world itself'.

Inevitably the fictions of Forster and Fitzgerald position the motorcar as a symbol of breakdown and cultural wreckage. Again, in contrast to the optimistic imagery of contemporary popular texts, in modern fiction the motorcar frequently signposts disruption, collision, and breakdown: accidents and catastrophes; physical and emotional collapse; the shattering of natural linkages; the wrecking of human relationships; and the rending of characters' communion with the divine . . . Forster and Fitzgerald are

aware that, more than any other symbol of the technological order, the motorcar confirms humanity's propensity to worship the mechanical thing. Finally, of course, the fictions of Forster and Fitzgerald foreground the wretched truth that we are quite literally torn apart by the object of our desires.

Ryder then proceeds to discuss the relationship between the automobile and horse-drawn carriages, seeing the origins of the automobile as predating the internal combustion engine: 'dreams of automobiles have excited the imaginations of people for at least three thousand years', a long history which includes coaches and steam driven vehicles. Ryder draws attention to the fact that many of the names of carriages, such as the landaulet and phaeton, survived into the automobile era. He also notes the influence of the sounds of the automobile on Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) in *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), which he suggests influences their appearance in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).² Motor cars are alluded to several times in Eliot's poem, but it would be misleading to say that they are of central importance: they are just one of the many symbols of modern life. But if the sounds of the automobile changed the sound of music and of poetry, then it is not surprising that poems of the lyrical, heroic nature that Birkin envisaged in praise of the automobile did not appear. (If we are to discuss the influence of machinery on music, then it is perhaps also to the music of Serge Prokofiev (1891–1953) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) that we should look.)

Ryder refers to Marinetti and the Futurists on several occasions. In support of the argument that the automobile influenced Stravinsky, he refers to the Futurist musician, Luigi Russolo (1885–1947), who invented a 'noise intoner', which 'unleashed the shocking roar of an internal combustion engine'. Russolo gave a private performance at Marinetti's home in 1914, which had a huge impact on Stravinsky and Serge Diaghilev. However, this was already after the first performance of *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913.

Some issues raised by Ryder can be taken further. As has been indicated, the aeroplane and the motor car developed in parallel sequence, using the same technological innovations; very often the same pioneers were involved in their development, and the link between aeroplanes, motor cars and motorcycles often appears in the literature of the period.

Another significant point that Ryder does not develop is the way in which World War I substantially transformed motoring. The automobile, which had been an expensive form of pleasure and adventure, suddenly became of highly practical use in transporting men and armaments to the front, thereby greatly accelerating the pace at which men on both sides could be killed. The motor car contributed to the tragedy of the Great War, and so indeed did the aeroplane, although not to anything like the same extent as it did in World War II, where entire cities were destroyed thanks to bombing raids. Furthermore, motor cars developed new uses, not just as transport, but as weapons. In fact, touring cars, like the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost

were converted to armoured cars, which in their turn led to the development of the tank. The tank, like the aeroplane, came into its own in World War II. Furthermore, the Great War accelerated the adoption of mass production techniques, and by the 1920s, a significant division had developed between mass-produced motor cars and more traditionally designed sporting and luxury vehicles for the wealthy elite. Interestingly, representatives of both these traditions, the popular and the elite, the Ford Model T and the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, had proven themselves in the desert. T. E. Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922) mentions the successes relating to both automobiles. However, he is particularly generous in his praise of the Rolls-Royce: 'Great was Rolls, and great was Royce! They were worth hundreds of men to us in these deserts' ([1922] 2000, 509).

As already noted, the process of familiarization with motor cars took place as the century progressed. Davidson writes that 'cars or driving practices seem to become increasingly invisible . . .' (2012, 471). The symbolic force that the motor car had in early twentieth-century literature – the way in which it suggested adventure, individualism and tragedy – began to diminish. However, from the 1950s onwards, the motor car became extremely visible in film. Among the number of films from the 1950s and 1960s which deal directly with the theme of cars are *Genevieve* (Cornelius 1953), *The Yellow Rolls Royce* (Asquith 1964), and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Hughes 1968). In the 1970s, period films based on the novels of Fitzgerald, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster – novels in which automobiles featured – began to appear, and this is a trend that has continued to this day. There are also, of course, the many James Bond movies, in which cars play a significant role.

A further perspective on the relationship between the automobile and film is that provided by Jon Chatlos in his account of the poem 'The Right of Way' by William Carlos Williams. Chatlos writes that the poem, 'implicitly compares motorcar spectatorship and cinematic spectatorship' (2006, 140). In the poem (which dates from 1923), the poet notes a series of visual images which pass by in the course of a journey. The images are disconnected and the poet is not able to enter into any deeper relationship with the images he sees. Chatlos describes this 'nameless spectacle' as being linked to the 'male gaze' and the idea that driving a motor car in the early twentieth century 'is a gendered activity'. Chatlos contrasts the motorist with one of the images he sees: 'The motorist is active, seeing, and speaking, while the girl on the balcony is passive, seen and silent' (p. 141). 'In this sense, we might say that automobility does not aspire to the condition of the movies, rather the movies aspire to the condition of automobility: embodied spectatorship' (p. 142). As we shall see, the 'gaze' of other motorists contributes to the sense that Nick Carraway and the reader have of the status and symbolism of the Rolls-Royce in *The Great Gatsby* ([1925] 1970, 75).

While critics have noted the class division that occurred in motor vehicles during the 1920s, which distinguished some motor vehicles from others, my argument is

that this division was linked to the Great War and the way mass production quite suddenly developed, resulting in a division between automobiles for the masses and those for the wealthy. Mass-produced automobiles could be as reliable and effective forms of transport as the more expensive vehicles, and so the distinctions had less to do with technological development than with quality and status.

***The Great Gatsby* reconsidered**

A novel which has often featured in the critical discussion of the automobile in literature is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The central character, Jay Gatsby, is a man particularly interested in the new technology. In addition to his Rolls-Royce which features so prominently in the novel, he also owns a station wagon, two motor boats and a hydroplane. The whole novel is imbued with a sense of the new age of transport. It is cars which make Gatsby's extravagant parties possible: 'People were not invited – they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island, and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door' (p. 47). At the same time, Gatsby's own automobiles play a part in transporting his guests: 'On weekends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains' (p. 45). At the party itself, '... the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive ...' (p. 46).

Even Gatsby's kitchen has a machine to assist in the manufacture of his parties:

Every Friday five crates of oranges arrived from a fruiterer in New York – every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb. (p. 45)

The world of mass production is presented here in miniature. The machine for pulping oranges is like those developed by Henry Ford (1863–1947) for the mass production of motor cars. One worker spends all day repeating the same meaningless task, but in the process facilitates the production of a seamless flow of automobiles (or orange juice). Gatsby's parties are produced using the same principles.

Ronald Berman writes of the importance of film and theatre as images in the novel – the worlds of Hollywood and Broadway: Daisy Buchanan's world is closely linked to Hollywood, while Gatsby's is more connected with Broadway (Berman 1994, 117). These realms are also connected to fashion, design, photography and marketing. 'Characters in *The Great Gatsby* remember advertisements and pose for the camera and go to the movies; they are overseen by an iconic billboard. We first meet Daisy and Jordan theatrically posed ...' (p. 113). The automobile fits into this

world of style and design: ‘The language of the marketplace infiltrates everywhere’; ‘Gatsby knows that his gorgeous and melodic car establishes his status’ (pp. 6–7).

Reading through some of the earlier criticism of *The Great Gatsby*, one realizes that not all critics have found the theme of the automobile to be of special interest. For instance, Dan McCall, in an article on the influence of Keats on *The Great Gatsby*, refers to the automobile theme only briefly, while Frances Kerr, writing on the gender aspects of the novel, hardly refers to it at all – apart, that is, from mentioning the accident and the speeding car (McCall 1971, 521–530; Kerr 1996, 405–431). But the automobile is a recurrent focus in the novel. When Nick Carraway first visits the Buchanans and Daisy asks if the people of Chicago miss her, Carraway replies: ‘The whole town is desolate. All the cars have the left wheel painted black as a mourning wreath, and there’s a persistent wail all night along the north shore’ (p. 16). Hence, from the beginning, Daisy is associated with the automobile and with death. Much later in the novel, after the fatal accident, when Carraway recounts Gatsby’s first impressions of Daisy, her home is described as ‘. . . redolent of this year’s shining motor-cars . . .’ (p. 154.) Tom Buchanan is also associated with the automobile, and is linked to the ‘bad driving’ metaphor (Makowsky 2011, 31). The scandal Tom is involved in shortly after his marriage to Daisy emerges as a result of a car accident (pp. 83–84).

In *The Great Gatsby*, class divisions can be seen in relation to the automobiles the characters drive. Nick Carraway drives an old Dodge. It was in fact Dodge Brothers who coined the term ‘dependability’ to describe their vehicles. Carraway has all the qualities which go with such an automobile – he is understated, undemonstrative, dependable and unpretentious.

In contrast with Nick’s Dodge, Gatsby’s Rolls-Royce is the epitome of luxury:

I’d seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream colour, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town. (p. 70)

Gatsby’s Rolls-Royce is, in fact, the large 40/50 h.p. model, the Silver Ghost. This car would have been an unusual car on the roads of America in 1922, as they were not built in large quantities. Berman comments: ‘Few of the cars on the pages of *Vanity Fair* are less elaborate than Gatsby’s, which begins to seem representative rather than extreme’ (1994, 18). What is unique about Gatsby’s car is not the coachwork, but the fact that it is a Rolls-Royce, and so stood out from any American car of the day.

As they drive to New York, Nick describes the journey:

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at

us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby's splendid car was included in their sombre holiday. As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. (p. 75)

This extract is significant in a number of ways, for instance, it prefigures the way in which the Rolls-Royce becomes the "death car" as the newspapers called it' (p. 144). The extract also anticipates Gatsby's own comparatively meagre funeral procession at the end of the novel (p. 181). And there is an interesting connection with Jon Chatlos's treatment of the William Carlos Williams poem and the idea of 'the male gaze' in relation to automobility, film and spectatorship. However, because the Rolls-Royce is travelling in traffic, some of which is moving in the same direction as Gatsby's car, the images are more extended than those in the Williams poem, and an interaction takes place between the various motoring spectators. It is as if several films are playing simultaneously. Here Nick is passive in the face of the 'gaze' of the other motorists, as Meredith Goldsmith notes, while Gatsby 'appears less as a man than as something of an event' (Goldsmith 2003, 446).

It is quite clear in the novel that Tom Buchanan's blue coupé is not in the same league as Gatsby's Rolls-Royce – one of the reasons, perhaps, why Buchanan is so keen to drive Gatsby's car to New York. Buchanan refers to it disparagingly as 'this circus wagon' (p. 127). Fitzgerald himself owned a second hand Rolls-Royce, and one cannot imagine him agreeing with Buchanan's judgement on Gatsby's car (Mizener 1951, 150).

The squalor of Wilson's garage is symbolized by the wreck of an old Ford. When Nick first visits the garage, he notices that 'the only car visible is the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner' (p. 30–31). Buchanan's motor car cannot have been as desirable as Gatsby's if he was considering selling it to Wilson – even if he was in fact only pretending an interest in this possibility.

However, it is not quite clear which car Buchanan is considering selling: for instance, Lauraleigh O'Meara takes it to be the blue coupé (1994, 76), while Jacqueline Lance writes: 'As a married woman, Daisy and her husband possess at least two cars of their own, the blue coupe and the older model car that Tom considers selling to George Wilson' (2000, 27). There is of course also the 'large open car', driven by a chauffeur, in which Daisy arrives at Nick Carraway's for tea and the meeting set up with Gatsby (Fitzgerald, p. 92). In fact, Buchanan may well have a number of cars in his possession. However, O'Meara builds her entire discussion on the apparent transaction taking place between Buchanan and Wilson relating to the blue coupé (1994, 73–87).

Jacqueline Lance discusses the colour symbolism in the novel in relation to the automobiles, quoting an earlier article by Daniel Schneider which suggests that the colours are related to the characters' ideals and aspirations: that white 'symbolizes

purity', that yellow becomes the 'symbol of money' and that blue was 'the ideal Gatsby was straining towards' (Lance 2000, 25–26). She writes: 'Gatsby believes that his automobile will advertise his wealth and new status, and it does with unfortunate results. He unwittingly advertises his status as an outsider, one of the *nouveau riche* of West Egg' (p. 26). Later in the article, she describes Gatsby's Rolls-Royce as 'gaudy', while Buchanan's blue coupé is 'tasteful' (p. 30). This is surely reading too much into the colour symbolism and the cars themselves. In England and Europe, a Rolls-Royce was hardly associated with the *nouveau riche*, while in the novel, Buchanan's coupé is not described at all. Simply because Fitzgerald has not described the various cars of the Buchanans does not mean that they are more 'tasteful' than Gatsby's Rolls-Royce. Lance comments: 'These understated cars reflect the understated good taste of the Buchanans; they are comfortable with their wealth and social position and do not need to advertise their status by driving gaudy and showy automobiles' (p. 27).

Both Laurence E. Mac Phee and R. A. Corrigan have argued that the name of Jordan Baker is linked to the Jordan motor car, a name which through the marketing campaign of the company was closely associated with the very kind of sporty, independent young woman that Jordan Baker personifies (Mac Phee 1972, 207–212; Corrigan 1973, 152–158). Mac Phee also argues that Jordan's surname is associated with 'a luxury upholstery fabric for automobiles' (p. 208), while Corrigan connects it with another car, the Baker Electric (p. 156). Without more evidence than the two writers provide, this may simply be a coincidence; however, several other critics, such as Veronica Makowsky, have developed the idea that Jordan Baker's name is related to the Jordan and Baker motor vehicles. Makowsky quotes Mathew J. Brucolli in support of this view (Makowsky 2011, 34). Hence, this idea is worth keeping in mind while discussing the theme of the automobile in the novel. (See also Berman 1994, 6).

If Fitzgerald sometimes gives his characters the attributes of motor cars, he is also inclined to give cars the attributes of humans. Luis Girón Echevarría has noted that Fitzgerald sometimes personifies the motor car: 'It is variously "stubborn", "sullen", "snorting"; at times it slides "along on tiptoe"'. In *The Great Gatsby* Nick notices the "throbbing taxi cabs" bound for the theatre district, and later becomes aware of the automobiles that turn "expectantly" into Gatsby's drive, only to describe a darkened house, and then to drive "sulkily away" (Echevarría 1993, 75).

There are in fact many examples, such as when a truck 'gave out a cursing whistle behind us' (Fitzgerald p. 131). The idea of the Ford in Wilson's garage 'crouched in a dim corner' creates an image of the subservience and suppressed violence of Wilson himself. Fitzgerald also uses the idea of a car journey as a metaphor for life. Again, this is a point that Echevarría notes, and he gives a variety of examples from Fitzgerald's fiction (1993, 75). In *The Great Gatsby*, the example is when Jordan nearly has a motor accident and comes dangerously close to hitting a workman.

Carraway accuses her of being 'a rotten driver' (p. 65). There follows a discussion between them which suggests that her carelessness is an integral part of her life: she does not take any responsibility for what she does. This discussion anticipates the way that Daisy likewise refuses to take responsibility for the accident in which Myrtle Wilson is killed, and she allows Gatsby to take the blame. Even Tom Buchanan does not know the truth, as Carraway discovers some months after the tragedy when he by chance sees Tom in New York (p. 186).

Carraway dates Jordan Baker, whose 'bored haughty face . . . turned to the world concealed something'. He suddenly remembers what it is – the fact that she is dishonest: 'When we were on a houseparty together up in Warwick, she left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it – and suddenly I remembered the story about her that eluded me that night at Daisy's' (p. 64). The story is about a golf tournament in which she may have cheated, but the matter was never finally resolved. The incident involving the car indicates her dishonesty, but also, in passing, it indicates her carelessness – with cars.

When Nick is asked to lunch by Gatsby, the description of Gatsby is linked to the way he is seen in relation to his automobile: 'He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so particularly American – that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games' (p. 70). One gets a sense from this that Gatsby is in fact a good driver. His restlessness also indicates a quickness and an alertness, the very opposite qualities of those of a drunken driver, such as the one who crashed a car at one of his parties (pp. 61–62).

When Gatsby first meets Daisy, she drives a little white roadster. In fact Jordan's first memory of Gatsby is of him sitting in the white roadster with Daisy (p. 81). At this time, Gatsby does not own a car and is a penniless young officer. Daisy's white roadster is a symbol of her independence and social position. The reasoning behind Gatsby's allowing her to drive the Rolls-Royce back from New York may be linked to this – a desire to re-establish his former relationship to her. However, the 'splendid' Rolls-Royce may have been more difficult to drive than the little white roadster.

Gatsby explains to Nick: 'You see, when we left New York she was very nervous and she thought it would steady her to drive – and this woman rushed out at us just as we were passing a car coming the other way' (p. 150). It is a curious idea that driving the car will steady Daisy's nerves – and Gatsby misjudges in allowing her to drive after the argument with Buchanan and after her extreme withdrawal into herself (p. 141). Also, Daisy drives the big Rolls-Royce at night, which is even more of a challenge if she is not used to driving such a vehicle. It is difficult for a person used to driving a small car to judge the parameters of a much larger one.

The Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost was a heavy car which had a 7.4 litre engine. In 1922, it only had two wheel brakes which were not power assisted. When Tom

decides to stop the car suddenly, he ‘threw on both brakes impatiently’ – in other words, he activated both the footbrake and the emergency hand brake (p. 128). To do this required strength, as the big car had to be steered with one hand. Hence the car was a challenge to drive, especially given the fact it was right hand drive. For Gatsby to pull on the emergency brake after the accident, means that he has to reach over Daisy to the far right hand side of the car (p. 151).

Here we are faced with the *hubris* at the heart of the tragedy. Gatsby’s belief in Daisy is so strong that it is uncritical and accepting, and while this may have been an understandable attitude towards her when he was a young lieutenant, it is shown to lack validity in the world in which she now lives. Like Jordan, she is a careless driver and she will do anything to protect herself, regardless of the tragedy which then ensues. The idea that she is an independent, emancipated woman – symbolized by her driving – is an illusion which is brought sharply into focus. This is Gatsby’s dream – one that turns into a nightmare. The Rolls-Royce symbolizes Gatsby’s triumph over his circumstances, over his former poverty. It asserts his social status and places him in a position where he can compete for Daisy, yet it is a car which is ‘monstrous’ in its lack of proportion, something that comes to destroy the very illusion he has created.

Conclusion

Sir Henry Birkin, as one of the foremost British racing drivers, was not unacquainted with tragic accidents caused by motor vehicles. He crashed his car on more than one occasion, and his younger brother was killed in a racing accident in 1927. Birkin held the lap record at Brooklands at 137.96 m.p.h., and was considered to be one of the most daring racing drivers of his day. One of his racing cars did in fact kill him, yet in the most surreptitious way. He burned his arm on the exhaust while practicing, and died several weeks later of septicaemia. Cars could kill you in a myriad of unusual ways (Birkin’s ghost 2004).

The Rolls-Royce does indeed kill Gatsby, yet not in any direct or obvious way. Simply owning the car and having it intimately linked to his identity, while allowing Daisy to drive it, leads inevitably to his own tragic death. It is also a case of murder and mistaken identity on two counts, yet Gatsby’s death is nonetheless a consequence in part of his fascination with cars.

This is not tragedy as it is conceived by Aristotle, nor by Shakespeare, who seemed to think that humans were responsible for their own destinies. Rather it is tragedy as conceived in the machine age, an era governed by the idea of the production line – both process and product. This particular notion of tragedy is perhaps best articulated by the Chorus in Anouilh’s *Antigone* (1942), which expresses the sense of its being ‘automatic’: ‘The machine is in perfect order, it has been oiled ever since

time began, and it runs without 'friction' ([1942] 1981, 34). Tragedy is itself like a machine, while a machine can become an agent of the tragedy.

Notes

1 Henry Birkin may not in fact have been the single author of *Full Throttle*. Birkin is said to have employed a ghost writer, Michael Burn (1912–2010), who wrote the autobiography under his direction (See Birkin's ghost 2004; see also Burn Obituary 2010).

2 However, the claim for links between *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *The Waste Land* needs to be qualified. In Eliot's 'Notes on the Waste Land', Stravinsky is not mentioned as a source (Eliot [1922] 1978, 76–80).

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BRIAN PEARCE is Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design at Durban University of Technology. He is an Associate Professor in Drama Studies and a Member of the Institute of Systems Science at DUT. He was the Editor of *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* from 2000 to 2008.