

The Aesthetics of the Unrealistic Dreamers: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Haruki Murakami

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I. Minnesota Winter in Fitzgerald's Literary Imagination

The essence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's dream was born and nurtured in Minnesota and never forgotten throughout his life. The bitter cold and Midwestern winters remained alive deep in his imagination and can be found in many of his works including *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Have you ever seen a palace made of ice? It is ephemeral, just like the Navaho sand paintings. It is also as fragile as a sandcastle. As long as the cold continues, an ice palace can stand up firmly but as soon as it warms up, it is destined to melt away. It is impossible to retain the beauty of ice in the presence of heat. Although no one wants the beauty of ice to disappear, we also look forward to spring's warmth returning, which inevitably causes ice to melt, destroying an ice palace without mercy.

Images like this give us a sense of Fitzgerald's complex and contradictory emotions. This is the most exquisitely beautiful aspect of his writing. From one moment to the next, he moves from sparkling beauty to grotesque ugliness in a way that is similar to how snow changes throughout the winter. During the first snowfall, as the earth is silently blanketed in pristine whiteness it is incredibly quiet, almost solemn. The world becomes a magical place. This beautiful scene warms our hearts as creation is transformed into a winter wonderland.

Then, suddenly without notice, the snow stops, and beauty is complete, brilliant and fantastic. This winter scene embraces us even more tenderly than the soft darkness of the night. But moments like this cannot last forever. Inevitably, people will walk in the snow and cars will drive through it. Slowly its purity will be defiled and it will become ugly, completely transforming the dreamlike world of just a few moments earlier into the mundane world of winter.

Because the beauty of such poignant moments disappears all too soon, we must grab it as quickly as we can. The only way to capture this beauty is through memory, which then becomes eternal. Although Fitzgerald never returned to St. Paul after the

birth of his daughter, Scottie, the beauty of his hometown continued to live on in his imagination. The St. Paul he describes in his work exists only in memory. For writers like Fitzgerald, memories are a precious treasure. They are the *prima materia* that authors weave into their stories.

Only someone born and raised in Minnesota can tolerate such long winters. At the very least, it takes time for people new to the area to acclimate. It must have come as quite a shock for a Southern girl like Sally Carol Happer in “Ice Palace” (1920) to visit St. Paul for the first time in the middle of winter. In any case, the fact that Sally Carol couldn’t deal with the cold wasn’t anyone’s fault.

Fitzgerald’s “Ice Palace” is a story born directly from this environment. Even the title chills the reader. Although it begins with abundant warm sunshine, and ends with languid, sultry heat, the core of the story is filled with cold, depressing images like the ice palace. When Sally Carol was lost inside the ice palace, she felt “deep terror,” which was for her the incarnation of the North. She experienced “the dreary loneliness that rose from ice-bound whalers in the Arctic seas, from smokeless trackless wastes where were strewn the whitened bones of adventure. It was an icy breath of death; it was rolling down low across the land to clutch at her” (58). What she wanted was “warmth and summer and Dixie.” Things in the North were all “foreign” (59) for her. The sharp contrast between cold and warmth in this story makes the frigid Minnesota winter even more unbearable and her break-up with Harry Bellamy all the more poignant.

There is a fundamental difference in temperament between people from the North and the South, which is undoubtedly shaped by these radically different environments. This is, of course, a major theme in this story. It is only natural that readers sympathize with the Southern belle Sally Carol. Fitzgerald has a special kind of affinity for images like the ice palace, which confine dreams within, creating a beautiful form of suspended animation. He suggests that eternity cannot exist in this world. If this is true, then we must capture the most brilliantly beautiful aspects of life whenever we can, even if only for a moment. No one can criticize this desire. When Sally Carol suddenly left Harry to return to the South, his incarnation of beauty also deserted him. He could no longer keep alive the beauty he longed for, which was embodied in the person of Sally Carol and the ice palace. They both melted away with her departure.

On the surface, the ice palace is clearly a symbol of beauty, drawing others to it. But it is also a very sad image, encasing the dreams of Fitzgerald’s characters, making them

inaccessible and maybe even killing them off in the process. Fitzgerald was very attracted to this kind of complex, multi-dimensional image, which contains both sadness and an ephemeral sense of beauty. It reminds us of the powerful effect Daisy had on Gatsby in his younger days. Even though he knew she would eventually disappear, he desperately wanted to embrace this kind of short-lived beauty. He was satisfied even if their relationship lasted for only a brief moment.

Fitzgerald savored this kind of transient kind of beauty that eventually melds into the dark blue night. This dark blue is the color of the deepest winter nights in Minnesota, which gave birth to the ephemeral dreams Fitzgerald tried to capture in his writing and life.

Whenever I think of Minnesota winters, I recall the golf scene from Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams" (1922). After a dreadfully long winter, when spring finally comes and the weather warms up even the tiniest bit, people are absolutely crazy to get outside. Even if there is still snow on the ground, they joyfully rush out to the golf course to play golf again. Although I can understand their feelings, I also can't help wondering why no one is willing to wait just one more week until the ground is clear. But that's impossible. It's just the way it is.

In April the winter ceased abruptly. The snow ran down into Black Bear Lake scarcely tarrying for the early golfers to brave the season with red and black balls. Without elation, without an interval of moist glory, the cold was gone. (43)

Needless to say, colored balls are essential for these hasty golfers because they are easy to spot in white snow. This insignificant little scene from Fitzgerald's short story actually reveals a very important theme that runs throughout all of his work. There is an underlying hope that stems from the knowledge that spring will always return. No matter how harsh the winter is, a glimmer of hope remains because spring always comes back. This kind of optimism, or tenacity of purpose, is found in many of Fitzgerald's characters.¹

One example is found in "Afternoon of an Author" (1936), Fitzgerald's short story from his later years. "The author" in the story seems to be very ill and it takes him a

¹ See my book, *Gurēto gyatubi no sekai: Dākuburū no yume* [*A Dark Blue Dream: The Great Gatsby*]

great deal of resolution to go out. Also, his business as a writer is presumably not going well. But he encourages himself: “Stick to your last, boy” (175). While waiting for a bus, he says to himself: “Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees” (177). These are actually Stonewall Jackson’s last words, who was a Confederate general during the Civil War. They are not the last words one would expect of the declining author. He still has the will to cross the river and hang in there after taking a rest under the trees. He still cherishes life itself, “not wanting to give it up at all” (178). Moreover, when he comes back to his apartment, he fancies looking up at his apartment windows: “The residence of the successful writer. . . . I wonder what marvelous books he’s tearing off up there. It must be great to have a gift like that—just sit down with pencil and paper. Work when you want—go where you please” (180). This attitude of “the author” comes from nothing but his patience or tenacity. An inexhaustible desire for life can be seen in him.

Another example is found in “Pasting It Together” (1936) where Fitzgerald refers to himself as a “cracked plate.”

. . . the cracked plate has to be retained in the pantry, has to be kept in service as a household necessity. It can never again be warmed on the stove nor shuffled with the other plates in the dishpan, it will not be brought out for company, but it will do to hold crackers late at night or to go into the ice box under left-overs. . . . (145)

This is nothing other than his attachment to life. He tried to stick to the last minute of his life, though it was rather a short one.

Growing up in Minnesota taught him that if he waited patiently through the long dark months of winter, something deep inside would survive and flourish once again when the days warmed up. Then, what survived during those long dark winter nights?

II. Lost City and Found City

At the end of “My Lost City” (1932), the narrator, who is Fitzgerald himself, screams within, “Come back, come back, O glittering and white!” What does this glittering whiteness refer to? I believe he is most certainly talking about New York, his “lost city”, but the image of snow in Minnesota also comes to mind. He also says, “I can

only cry out that I have lost my splendid mirage” (115). This evokes not only the image of the New York City of his youth but also the image of Judy Jones in her own splendid youth in “Winter Dreams.” Dexter Green, the protagonist of this story, was always searching for “the glittering things themselves,” not “association with glittering things and glittering people” (47). This means that Judy Jones was only a symbol or incarnation of “the glittering things” that Dexter longed for. She was just a “mirage” for him after all as New York City was.

Rudolph Miller in “Absolution” (1924) has the same kind of desire for glittering things as Dexter Greene. Rudolph creates “a make-believe playmate” Blatchford Sarnemington as a new identity “who embodies everything the lonely Rudolph is not and wants to be” (Stavola 127). He is evidently “a legitimate precursor to Jay Gatsby” (Stavola 129). When Rudolph hears “Father Schwartz’s half-crazed talk of a glimmering world” (Stavola 128), even though he doesn’t understand what he is talking about, he is sure that there is “something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that ha[s] nothing to do with God” (92) as he has been secretly fantasizing about. Fitzgerald celebrates “the vast creative power of the imagination” (Stavola 128) in this story.

His characters Dexter and Rudolph share the same kind of dreams. Dexter is unconsciously driven by his own winter dreams while Rudolph’s imagination is set free at dusk when he engages with his imaginary playmate, Blatchford Sarnemington. While Dexter’s dreams are activated in the presence of a real person, Judy Jones, Rudolph’s dreams come alive in the presence of his imaginary self. With nothing to worry about, Rudolph “... took a deep breath of the crisp air and began to say over and over to himself the words ‘Blatchford Sarnemington, Blatchford Sarnemington!’”(83) He prepared this name for the times when he would put himself in the midst of the glittering things. The dreams of Dexter and Rudolph were both born in Minnesota and deeply influenced by the American dream.

Sometimes, there comes a moment in a man’s life when he encounters a very special woman who stands glittering before him, altering the course of his destiny. Without a doubt, this is what happens to Dexter Green when he meets Judy Jones, the woman he is destined to love. She is clearly an embodiment of the dream he carries within himself, born from his experiences of growing up in Minnesota. In stories like this, we see clearly that engraved into one side of Fitzgerald’s memory is the fleeting nature of his lost city, New York, while firmly embedded on the other side is his hometown, St. Paul,

Minnesota.

Another aspect of his writing that is influenced by Minnesota winters is his use of color. For example, in “Winter Dreams” he writes: “Later in the afternoon the sun went down with a riotous swirl of gold and varying blues and scarlets, and left the dry rustling night of western summer” (50).

The color blue described here is the unmistakable dark blue essence of his dream, born from the lakes and sky of his home state. In this summer scene, this color will soon take on a darker tone and develop a stronger sense of presence as it moves from autumn into winter. As a result, Dexter is increasingly filled with a sense of joy as autumn arrives. He “knew there was something gorgeous about the fall.” That is also the time when Nick Carraway decides to go back to Minnesota after Gatsby’s death.

Fall made him clench his hands and tremble and repeat idiotic sentences to himself and make brisk abrupt gestures of command to imaginary audiences and armies. October filled him with hope which November raised to a sort of ecstatic triumph, and in this mood the fleeting brilliant impressions of the summer at Sherry Island were ready grist to his mill.

In this season, Dexter readies himself for his own winter dreams. This is the most exciting time of year for him. During “the long Minnesota winter” that “shut[s] down like the white lid of a box” (43), there are many days when the gloomy sky hovers above like a heavy mass of lead. Everything is motionless and completely silent, except for falling snow. But in spite of such a heavy atmosphere, Fitzgerald suggests that if we “stretch out our arms farther” (*Gatsby* 141), tomorrow we will eventually be able to grasp that quintessential green hope lying just beyond the darkness.

If that is indeed true, then what is it that Fitzgerald really longed for? Is it the sparkling effervescence of champagne and the hustle and bustle of New York streets? He certainly enjoyed these things but at the same time, the land and the climate of the Midwest itself, especially Minnesota, remained deep within him. At least within the images of St. Paul in Fitzgerald’s writing, there is a sense of mystery and eternal youth. This eternal youth is what Nick, who had been lost in New York, sought in Minnesota. Beyond what the protagonist of “My Lost City” saw from the summit of the Empire State Building was the Midwestern prairie, “the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond

the Ohio” (*Gatsby* 137) including Minnesota. What he saw from there was the city that “was not the endless succession of canyons he had supposed but that *it had limits*.” New York “faded out into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless.” It “was a city after all and not a universe” (114-15).

In “Winter Dreams,” it comes as no surprise that Judy’s physical beauty slowly fades within the reality of married life. She cannot retain the sparkling vitality of her youth forever. That’s only natural. Time moves on and changes everything. No one can stop this. Yet Dexter tries to keep her beauty in a frozen state of suspended animation. Harry Bellamy might have unconsciously wanted to keep Sally Carol’s beauty in the ice palace too. In this respect, Nick and Gatsby are exactly the same. For whatever reason, neither of them can tolerate any sense of personal disillusionment. This is the inevitable challenge everyone must face when they try to live the American dream. One must eventually reconcile the reality of their own lives with the magnificent dreams that first ignited their imagination.

The first time Nick sees Gatsby, it is under the dark blue night sky.

The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight and turning my head to watch it I saw that I was not alone—fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor’s mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens. (20)

Gatsby is often portrayed in nocturnal scenes because of the natural connection between the world of dreams and imagination. On Nick’s last night in the East, he realizes that he has lost touch with the living reality of the dream itself. Then, in a precious moment, the significance of Gatsby’s dream is revealed to him as he gazes out into the dark blue night. Through Nick, Gatsby’s dream is able to live on. As “the moon [rises] higher,” the “inessential” (140) things from his life in the East fade away and he recalls the moment Dutch sailors first laid eyes on this vast green continent. The original American dream was born then. He realizes that so many of the worthless things he experienced while living in New York have been nothing but distractions, keeping him

from what is truly important and now he knows that the time has come for him to return to the Midwest where he can reconnect with and nurture his own dark blue dream.

Shortly after, as winter begins and “the wind [blows] the wet laundry stiff on the line,” Nick leaves the East behind and returns to Minnesota. The coldness of this scene overlaps with the frigid air of the homecoming train scene toward the end of the novel.

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour before we melted indistinguishably into it again.

That’s my middle-west—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns but the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name. (137)

It is not a coincidence that he chooses this time of year to return to Minnesota because it clearly holds a special meaning for him. Even if his decision was made unconsciously, there is no doubt that the embryo of his dream, which was conceived during the long Minnesota winters of his youth, remains alive deep within, guiding him.

Once Nick can bring his dream back to the dark blue skies of the Midwestern prairies and exposes it once again to the harsh winters, it will undoubtedly begin to move forward, dashing toward the promise of spring. He was no more a part of New York than Fitzgerald who reminisces about himself in “My Lost City,” even while living there. It was the city where “a lot of lost and lonely people” (110) lived. Just like the firefly that Toru Watanabe, the protagonist of Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* (1987), released and saw off. They were all in the same boat. The city is full of such lonesome fireflies. Furthermore, they are the same class of people as those who gathered at Gatsby’s parties and passed by Toru in the phone box at the very end of the novel. When Toru calls his girlfriend Midori from a phone box, she asks him where he is now.

But he can't answer the question:

Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place? All that flashed into my eyes were the countless shapes of people walking by to nowhere. Again and again, I called out for Midori from the dead center of this place that was no place. (386)

Just like Toru in Tokyo, the narrator of "My Lost City" was in such an uncertain situation in New York, but he is part of the Midwest where his snow is and where he never loses his identity. Where will his dream run to next? No one knows. But surely it will continue to move toward something "glittering" off in the future, where tomorrow always waits.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (141)

In this way, the archetypal environment of Midwest lives on in Gatsby, just as it does in Fitzgerald's writing, and becomes a driving force in his work and life.

The artist Pablo Picasso, in a similar way, was also attracted to the color blue. During his younger days in Paris, when he was an up-and-coming artist, he immersed himself in this color. This is known as his "blue period," which is said to represent the despair, loneliness and melancholy he felt after the suicide of his friend. Even though this period was followed by a "rose period," which lasted for several years, the color blue continued to play an important role in his life and is often found in the background of his work. Blue sustained him throughout his life. Although the basic tone of Picasso's "blue period" is certainly emotional, it was never negative. Behind it was a kind of audacious vitality, and through cubism, his relationship with blue led him to become one of the greatest artists in the new century.²

In the same way, the dark blue of Minnesota winter nights is always present in the

² Okamoto p. 79

background of Fitzgerald's writing. As we know, "green" also plays a significant role as a foreground color in *The Great Gatsby*, but it is dark blue that lies in the background of his work nourishing and supporting him. In Fitzgerald's case, "blue" represents the tenacious sense of hope he clung to throughout his life.

Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament"—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (5-6)

Isn't it the origin of the America spirit that Gatsby's "heightened sensitivity" grasped? As Nick realizes at the end, the spirit has been lost during the rapid change of society. Gatsby was the only person who could stick to it, while others had already forgotten about it. Those were the people who gathered "like moths" (33) at Gatsby's parties. They were just wandering around in a strong sense of loss. The spirit is, in other words, the essence of the American dream. Fitzgerald desperately tried to piece together the whole picture of it in his work.

III. The Lost Original Landscape

Haruki Murakami, a literary successor of Fitzgerald through space and time, once confessed that he had been at odds with his father for a long time and the issue has often been covered when critics talk about him and his work. His father was a high school teacher of Japanese literature and rigid to his only son. Murakami was urged to read Japanese classics since he was a small child. In fact, he read many of them, or almost all of them, but at the same time, a certain kind of revulsion to Japanese literature began to

grow inside him which eventually led him to the world of Western literature, especially American literature. For him reading American literature was a backlash against Japanese literature, a symbol of the patriarchal system for him. It was actually not just Murakami but most Japanese who longed for a release from the burden of traditional Japanese culture after World War II. Just like American youth after World War I who wanted to be freed from old Victorian morals and values.

The changes that came about were the natural outcome of this desire for freedom from the past for both the United States and Japan. In spite of a quarter-century time gap between them, the problem was the same. Change came very suddenly for both countries. In the case of Japan, people voraciously absorbed everything from American culture that flowed in after their complete surrender to the United States in World War II. As Kawamura points out, Japanese people internalized anything they encountered from America unconditionally. America meant great and glittering things that included food, music, and a new way of living. Hungry in so many ways, Japan had no choice but to avidly consume this new culture. There was no room to stop and think about what to take in. They should have “once return[ed] to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly,” (*Gatsby* 86) but they couldn’t. Instead Murakami performed it in his works on behalf of the Japanese people. He retraced the footsteps people followed after the war and found that what they were immersed in was a casual and superficial Americanized way of living. That was Murakami’s Japan in the raw.

Murakami is not complaining about the fact that Japan has willingly accepted American culture since the end of the war. He himself has been actually an active receiver of it, jazz and literature especially. He just gives a warning to Japanese people who have unconsciously lost their spirit, which also means eventually losing their identity. The same is true for Fitzgerald. Murakami always tries to make people remember what they are losing and forgetting when they mindlessly consume what is in front of them. He urges them to pause and reminisce about the past from time to time in order to know where they are now. He is not telling them to stay in the past even if it is a delightful place. It is a bygone world. They should come back to the active present and keep moving toward future. But they should move on along the new current, while constantly identifying their point of origin. That’s why Murakami emphasizes: “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”

It is common knowledge that Yukio Mishima praised pre-war Showa era before

1941 and was disillusioned with the postwar situation of Japan. In the end, he committed suicide. Whatever the reason was, we can be certain that he avoided facing reality. He could only live in the past beautiful world of his imagination. Murakami refers to Mishima in the beginning of *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982) in a brief and indifferent way.

We walked through the woods to the ICU campus, sat down in the student lounge, and munched on hot dogs. It was two in the afternoon, and Yukio Mishima's picture kept flashing on the lounge TV. The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it didn't matter to us one way or the other. A student got up on a chair and tried fooling with the volume, but eventually he gave up and wandered off. (9)

No one seemed to care about his sensational death. This apathetic treatment of a great writer suggests that Murakami never allows his protagonists to give up their lives in spite of what happens to them. As a matter of fact, the protagonist of this novel survives the harsh reality of his life even though his close friend Rat kills himself. Actually Rat can be also seen as an alter-ego of the main character, demonstrating how all of us live with this tension between the part of ourselves that struggles to survive, while another aspect of self may want to die.

In Murakami's short story "Firefly" (1983), he described nostalgically and with a little sense of lament the original landscape of Japan, which no longer exists. This became the prototype for his legendary best-selling novel *Norwegian Wood*. One of the major reasons for its great popularity is that this novel reminds us of how lost we are now in this super capitalist society.

Toru Watanabe is presented with a firefly in an instant coffee jar from his dorm roommate. It is a stray firefly that has been separated from its group. He takes it to the dorm rooftop where the dorm residents usually hang their laundry. Dusk is deepening and no one is up there.

The firefly made a faint glow in the bottom of the jar, its light too weak, its color too pale. I hadn't seen a firefly in years, but the ones in my memory sent a far more intense light into the summer darkness, and that brilliant, burning image was the one that had stayed with me all that time. (61)

Fireflies in Toru's memory cast a blaze of light "like a shower of sparks" but the one in front of him now is so weak that it seems to be dying. What a contrast. He tries to remember when and where he last saw fireflies. He can "see the scene in [his] mind," but can't "recall the time or place."

After he puts himself in the middle of "that long-ago darkness," he releases the firefly from the jar. But it seems unable to "grasp its new surroundings" (62) and just hovers about. Toru waits for a long time studying it.

Only much later did the firefly take to the air. As if some thought had suddenly come to it, the firefly spread its wings, and in a moment it had flown past the handrail to float in the pale darkness. It traced a swift arc by the side of the water tank as if trying to bring back a lost interval in time. And then, after hovering there for a few seconds as if to watch its curved line of light blend into the wind, it finally flew off to the east.

Long after the firefly had disappeared, the trail of its light remained inside me, its pale, faint glow hovering on and on in the thick darkness behind my eyelids like a lost soul.

More than once I tried stretching my hand out in that darkness. My fingers touched nothing. The faint glow remained, just beyond their grasp. (62-3)

Although a dim light lingers, Toru is unable to touch it. This symbolizes the present situation that surrounds Toru and his contemporaries. The bright shining clusters of fireflies in the darkness of his memory are gone now, at least in the big cities like Tokyo. They are lost, maybe forever, but a single firefly can remind us of the "fragment of lost words" that Nick finds in what Gatsby says.

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (87)

We find the same kind of situation in “Winter Dreams,” which is the prototype of *The Great Gatsby*. The beauty of Judy in Dexter’s memory is gone irretrievably now. Dexter is dominated by an incurable sense of loss. These things considered, they share something in common, which is a lament for the lost original landscape where our psyche is nurtured. This lost firefly in *Norwegian Wood* takes wings with its last strength left searching for the lost landscape. Just like the case of Nick Carraway, however, what Toru has “almost remembered was uncommunicable forever” or unrecoverable now.

When Toru releases the firefly on the dorm roof at twilight, it reminds us also of Nick as he focuses his thoughts on “the last and greatest of all human dreams” (*Gatsby* 140). It is as if the beauty of memory is frozen in the dark blue of a frigid winter night. During the harsh winter or the depth of night, memory’s beauty remains in a pristine condition. But winter ends or even the darkest night transforms into dawn, bringing such beauty to an end. The kind of beauty in Fitzgerald’s and Murakami’s worlds is completely transient. No matter how hard we try to preserve it, such beauty elusively evolves and changes. It only exists in memory.

IV. Mujō or the Sense of Impermanence

On a personal note, as a person deeply steeped in Japanese aesthetics, Fitzgerald’s perseverance appeals deeply to me. This is also true for a number of other Japanese readers. In Japan, natural disasters are very common, including earthquakes, tsunami, and typhoons. As a result, a particular kind of worldview has evolved which enriches Japanese people’s appreciation of Fitzgerald.

For example, there is an aesthetic principle known as “mujō” which can help us understand why his work is so popular in Japan. The term mujō can be translated as “impermanence.” It conveys the notion that nothing lasts forever, and everything changes constantly. Stories by Fitzgerald, such as “Ice Palace” and “Winter Dreams,” embody this worldview beautifully, tugging at our heartstrings ever so tenderly. He offers us hope even in the middle of profound despair. Murakami himself must have been greatly encouraged by Fitzgerald as well.

Murakami explains this notion of mujō as follows in his acceptance speech for the Catalonia International Prize in 2011:

Mujō means that there is no steady state that will continue forever in life. All

things that inhabit this world will pass away; all things continue to change without end. We cannot find permanent stability. We cannot find anything to rely on that will not change or decay. Although mujō finds its roots in Buddhism, the concept of mujō has taken on a significance beyond its original religious sense. This concept of mujō has been seared deeply into the Japanese spirit, forming a national mindset that has continued on almost without change since ancient times.

The mujō perspective that all things must pass away can be understood as a resigned worldview. From such a perspective, even if humans struggle against the natural flow, that effort will be in vain in the end. But even in the midst of such resignation, the Japanese are able to actively discover sources of true beauty.

In the case of nature, for example, we take pleasure from cherry blossoms in spring, from the fireflies in summer and from the crimson foliage in autumn. We do so as a group and we do so as a matter of custom. We enthusiastically enjoy such fleeting seasonal moments, as if the pleasures they offered admitted of no further explanation. The places in Japan famous for cherry blossoms, or fireflies, or autumn foliage, are crowded with people when their season comes.

He refers to the firefly here too, raising the question, why do the Japanese love and cherish such things?

Because cherry blossoms, fireflies and autumn foliage all lose their exquisite beauty in a very short span of time. We travel far to witness that moment of the natural phenomenon in its full glory. Yet it is not merely a matter of observing a beautiful locale. Before our eyes, evanescent cherry blossoms scatter, the fireflies' will-o'-the-wisp vanishes, and the bright autumn leaves are snatched away. We recognize these events and we find in these changes a certain relief. Oddly, it brings us a certain peace of mind that the height of beauty passes—and fades away.

As D. T. Suzuki explains in *Japanese Spirituality*, mujō is not actually pessimistic. Rather it is aesthetic even though it is sometimes regarded negatively.³ Last of all, Murakami connects this sense of mujō with the natural disasters that have been

³ Suzuki, pp. 370-73. Sect. 4, Chap. 5 with a subhead "Shogyo wa mujō nari" ["All things are impermanent"]

constantly challenging Japan without mercy throughout its long history.

Whether or not that spiritual perspective has been influenced by those natural catastrophes of Japan is beyond my understanding. Nevertheless, we have overcome wave upon wave of natural disasters in Japan and we have come to accept them as “unavoidable things”. . . . We have overcome those catastrophes as a group and it is clear we have carried on in our lives. Perhaps those experiences have influenced our aesthetic sensibility. (2)

In this speech, named “Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer,” Murakami talks about the catastrophic earthquake that hit Northeastern Japan in 2011. He himself went through the big earthquake that hit the Kobe area in 1995. He was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the time, but his parents were caught in the middle of the earthquake and their house collapsed, as a result.

In 1997, after returning to Japan from America, he spent two days walking alone through the Kobe disaster site. That was two years after the quake. In his essay “A Walk to Kobe,” he refers to Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). He stopped at a little restaurant toward the end of his walk.

When I was young, I often used to come to this place with my girlfriend, down a few cold beers, and eat a freshly baked pizza.... We’d talk about our future. And of all the predictions we made then, not a single one came true. But this was a long, long time ago. Back when there was still a sea here, back when there were mountains.

Not that there aren’t still sea and mountains here. Of course there are. What I’m talking about is a different sea, and different mountains. Different from the ones here now. As I sip my second beer, I flip open my paperback copy of *The Sun Also Rises* and pick up where I left off. The lost story of a lost generation. I’m quickly lured back into their world.

When he left the restaurant, it was raining heavily outside.

When I finally leave the restaurant, it’s raining, as predicted, and I get wet.

Wretchedly wet, soaked to the bone. But by this point it's too much trouble to buy an umbrella. (175)

Here we can find the sense of resignation that mujō embraces. There is no point in worrying about floundering now.

Among American literature, Murakami especially has a liking for works that include a kind of glasswork-like sensitivity and fragility reminding us of the strong sense of loss that is often present in Truman Capote's and Fitzgerald's work. As he reread *The Sun Also Rises*, with its scenes of fishing and bullfighting, he became particularly aware of the fact that Hemmingway wrote with the same kind of sensitivity and sense of loss as Capote and Fitzgerald. At that time, Murakami might have thought in this way like Jake Barnes, the protagonist of the novel: "There certainly used to be a bright city of my youth. It isn't here anymore. But it surely was. 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'" (251) This is also the story of a lost generation. This is Murakami's version of "my lost city." The home or the original landscape of one single firefly in *Norwegian Wood* no longer remains either. The sheer sense of loss is here, but at the same time it is filled with a sense of resignation. There is no sense of despair. Although Murakami might have felt quite lost, just as Fitzgerald did, he can still find hope. He seeks relief in the aesthetic sense of mujō.

Just like the city of Kobe, Japan itself, made a rapid economic comeback after the war. Looking back on Japan's history and development, there is certainly a profound sense of loss. During its dramatic development, Japanese people gradually, and without realizing it, lost something very important deep within themselves. The rapid pace of change has accelerated this intense sense of loss. With no time to stop and reflect upon what was happening, a generation was left behind and unable to catch up with the direction in which Japan was moving. When they finally noticed what was going on, only a sense of "emotional bankruptcy" remained. They found themselves in the same situation that Josephine faces in "Emotional Bankruptcy" (1922). It is a cautionary tale that can be applied to lost people like the Japanese after World War II.

She was very tired and lay face downward on the couch with that awful, awful realization that all the old things are true. One cannot both spend and have. The love of her life had come by, and looking in her empty basket she had found not a

flower left for him, not one. After a while she wept.

“Oh, what have I done to myself?” she wailed. “What have I done? What have I done?” (286)

How symbolic it is! Josephine’s wail is a prime example of “lost and lonely people” in “My Lost City” and many other stories of the same ilk. All of them share Josephine’s sense of loss.

But after that, from under the rubble, a fragment of lost spirit began to emerge once again. This happens when people recognize their mistakes, wondering if it is too late? No, it isn’t. If they can just keep the spirit inside of themselves alive, it is possible to start over again just like Nick, who decides to trace back Gatsby’s wake of dreams.

In the same way, many American people rapidly abandoned their old values after World War I. As a result, for many, only a tragic sense of loss remained. *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates us this clearly. Behind materialistic prosperity, they began to lose their American spirit. Jay Gatsby, who kept an unwavering sense of faith, was the only exception, though he mistakenly pursued wealth. Realizing that, Nick Carraway, returns to the Middle West to seize it back after Gatsby’s death.

V. Unrealistic Dreamers

What Nick has found once again in his journey from loss to regeneration is not revealed in the novel, but it must be something equivalent to the “real snow” that exists in Nick’s memory. On his final night in the East, he reaffirms that the Midwestern snow he knew in the past was actually “real” and hopes that it is still true in the present.

Gatsby holds a never-give-up attitude within himself throughout his entire life, while Nick, who is also calmly hopeful, also possesses a sense of resignation at the same time. The contrast between Gatsby and Nick is clearly seen when they have a disagreement about how they each understand the past. When Nick says, “You can’t repeat the past,” Gatsby hits back passionately.

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

“I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before, he said, nodding

determinedly. “She’ll see.” (86)

Nick probably wanted to agree with him, but he was calm and mature enough to be realistic. Later he practiced what Gatsby wanted to do. Inheriting Gatsby’s will, Nick decided to return to his starting point to see what the right thing to do would be.

In this way, Nick’s attitude gradually moves toward pursuing infinite hope in the end. It was the Midwestern “real snow” that eventually changed him. His experience of “the thrilling returning trains of his youth,” which meant returning to his original landscape, supported him until the end of his life.

“Real snow” is Nick’s Midwestern identity and the origin of the American dream that Jay Gatsby adhered to throughout his life. They were both from the Midwest, Nick came from Minnesota and Gatsby from North Dakota. They get lost in the East, just like Fitzgerald who found himself lost in New York. Like his characters, Fitzgerald was able to revive his spirit back in the Midwest. Gatsby is dead now but his spirit, his American spirit, will continue to survive there and be carried on by his friend Nick Carraway.

This concept of *mujō* or impermanence, means an acceptance of reality, but at the same time there remains a glimmer of hope. It does not mean the end of something, but rather refers to the unyielding spirit which is included within this worldview. The “glittering and white” of an ice palace and winter dreams embody *mujō* views beautifully. As Dexter cries out, “Long ago . . . there was something in me, but now that thing is gone. Now that thing is gone, that thing is gone. I cannot cry. I cannot care. That thing will come back no more” (65). It is such a forlorn cry. All things are destined to disappear eventually. Impermanence is a fact of life. It is also where we can deeply sense the spirit of *mujō* at work. Resignation in the face of loss can also be the force from which new hope emerges, eventually becoming eternal. Hope is cyclical in that new things always emerge after the disappearance of something. Hope should last forever.

In view of this, Murakami’s *mujō* shares a lot in common with Fitzgerald. They are both connected through this perspective. The same applies to Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway too. Murakami says that dreaming is the novelists’ task, which he learned from F. Scott Fitzgerald. In other words, they are both dreamers. They are both beautiful, unrealistic dreamers.

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