

### Notes on the Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby*

- One of the major themes of the book is the futility and emptiness of dreams. In particular, characters who are caught up in a search for wealth and social status (typical of the American Dream) tend to have unhappy lives and tragic fates.
- Modern America, with its pursuit of material success, generates large amounts of physical waste in the process, waste that ends up in dumping grounds like the "valley of ashes." That pursuit also generates the psychological waste of failed dreams, unhappiness, desperation, and immorality.
- The ashes take on the "fantastic" shapes of our dreams ("fantastic" in the sense of "imaginary"—they are products of fantasy), the shapes that our minds impose on them, but they are "dim" and "already crumbling" as soon as they take shape, and they are doomed to fail.
- The sense of emptiness and desolation in the scene is developed with words like "desolate," "bleak," "grotesque," "ghastly," and "gray" that are used to describe it.
- The valley of ashes is "dismal" for the people who pass by it because it is a symbol of the unpleasant truth of their lives, and they don't want to face that truth.
- There is an implied Biblical allusion in the use of the ash and dust imagery that is important to see: these words and images are associated in the Bible with mortality, death, the destruction of the physical body. In funeral services the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is used to suggest human mortality.
- In Chapter 8, the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg are likened to the eyes of God, passively "brooding" (Chapter 2) over this futile, shallow, empty human activity and seeming to be disappointed and alienated by it. The description in Chapter 2 of the eyes as being "dimmed a little by many painless days under sun and rain" might suggest that our lack of devotion to our moral and religious ideals has weakened the presence of God in our lives, our society, and our consciences.
- Right before Wilson makes his comment about God seeing everything, there is another reference to the ashheaps and to "small gray clouds" taking on "fantastic shapes"—a reminder of the destruction of everyone's dreams at this point in the story.
- At the beginning of Chapter 8, the large amount of dust in Gatsby's house and the cigarettes he and Nick smoke (which turn into smoke and ash as they are smoked) suggest a connection to the valley of ashes: Gatsby's dream is dead.
- Near the end of Chapter 8, Nick's description of Gatsby's realization of the failure of his dream uses a number of words and phrases that connect it directly to the descriptions of the valley of ashes: "material without being real," "poor ghosts," "breathing dreams like air," "like that ashen, fantastic figure."
- Although Gatsby's dream itself, his devotion to Daisy, is pure, the "foul dust" that "float[s] in the wake of his dreams" (from near the beginning of Chapter 1) is a product of his preoccupation with material wealth (and the social status connected to it)—and also, perhaps, his failure to see that Daisy is not worthy of the intensity of his devotion. Gatsby must achieve material success and high social status as a means of being with Daisy, but the pursuit of that success has tragic consequences.

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