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Speed, Desire, and Collision: Automotive Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

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Abstract: This article examines the automobile as a crucial medium of modern experience in early twentieth-century American literature. Focusing on Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it argues that the automobile functions not merely as a symbol of technological progress or material wealth but as a cultural apparatus through which modern subjectivity is produced and contested. Tracing a three-part trajectory from speed to desire to collision, this article shows how, in Wharton, automotive speed transforms sensory perception while revealing the privilege that structures access to accelerated mobility; in Dreiser, the automobile becomes a form of "mobile visibility," converting economic status into public spectacle and intensifying fantasies of social advancement; and in Fitzgerald, the automobile's promises of autonomy and pleasure culminate in collision, exposing the unequal distribution of vulnerability and responsibility within modern consumer culture. By bringing these texts into a common analytical framework, the article develops the

concept of automotive modernity to describe the conjunction of technological movement, consumer desire, social aspiration, and bodily risk. It ultimately argues that collision is not external to automotive freedom but its immanent limit: the very technologies that appear to maximize individual mobility also reveal the inequalities and violence upon which that mobility depends.

Keywords: automobile; automotive modernity; speed; consumer desire; collision

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Introduction

The automobile transformed early twentieth-century American culture not simply by making people move faster, but by changing what travel and movement meant (Huang, 2026). Driving, as a particular way of travel, increasingly associated mobility with autonomy, speed with pleasure, and technological control with personal freedom (Tian & Lin, 2026). At the same time, automobile culture rendered wealth more visible, intensified consumer desire, and introduced new forms of bodily danger. The car therefore occupied a contradictory position within American modernity: it promised liberation from spatial and temporal constraint while embedding that freedom within structures of consumption, privilege, and risk.

American fiction registered this contradiction with particular force. In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the automobile is never simply an accessory to modern life. It changes how characters experience space, imagine social advancement, and understand their relation to others. Across these texts, automotive movement develops through a distinct literary trajectory: from the sensory exhilaration of speed, through the social intensification of desire, to the destructive consequences of collision.

This article uses the term automotive modernity to describe this conjunction of technological movement, subjective experience, consumer aspiration, and social risk. The concept draws on studies of automobility that have treated the automobile not as an isolated machine but as part of a larger social system involving roads, infrastructures, institutions, consumption, and cultural meanings. Such work has demonstrated that driving became closely connected to modern ideals of self-direction and autonomy. Literary scholars have likewise examined the perceptual effects of mechanical speed, the gendered meanings of driving, the relation between automobiles and class identity, and the symbolic importance of crashes and accidents.

These studies have established the automobile as an important category of modern cultural experience. The central problem, then, is not that cars have been overlooked in American literary criticism. Nor is it sufficient to argue that automobiles symbolize modernity, wealth, or technological progress. More revealing is the relationship among the different cultural functions that criticism has often treated separately: speed, consumer desire, social mobility, and accident.

Existing work on automotive consciousness has illuminated the perceptual and affective changes produced by driving, while cultural histories of automobility have shown how driving became associated with autonomy, citizenship, gender, and class. Studies of individual authors have further explored Wharton's engagement with speed and travel, Dreiser's representations of consumer aspiration, and Fitzgerald's use of automobiles to critique wealth, carelessness, and capitalist excess. Comparative scholarship has also connected automobile travel to broader systems of transportation and examined technological accidents as expressions of the inequalities of capitalist modernity. What remains less fully explored is the developmental relation among these phenomena. Speed, consumption, aspiration, and collision are often approached as separate themes, but early twentieth-century American fiction repeatedly binds them together. Automotive speed intensifies sensation; intensified mobility becomes attached to fantasies of self-making; those fantasies are increasingly expressed through conspicuous consumption; and the freedom associated with accelerated movement

ultimately encounters the material vulnerability of other bodies.

This article therefore argues that speed, desire, and collision should be understood as interconnected moments within a single structure of automotive modernity. In *The Custom of the Country*, the automobile produces a new sensory relationship to modern space. Speed offers exhilaration and the impression of liberation from older temporal and spatial limits. Yet Wharton also reveals that access to this accelerated sensorium is socially unequal. The pleasure of speed is inseparable from the economic privilege that makes such mobility possible. Dreiser shifts the emphasis from sensation to social aspiration. In *An American Tragedy*, the automobile participates in a consumer world in which material objects do not merely express identity but generate fantasies of becoming someone else. The car is particularly powerful because wealth displayed through the automobile does not remain stationary. It circulates through public space. The automobile thus converts class privilege into mobile visibility, allowing status to be seen in motion and encouraging the illusion that proximity to visible wealth might become social transformation. Fitzgerald brings this logic toward its violent limit. In *The Great Gatsby*, the automobile retains its associations with pleasure, sexuality, wealth, and freedom, but these meanings culminate in collision. The crash exposes the inequality concealed within the fantasy of autonomous mobility: those with wealth possess not only greater freedom of movement but also a greater capacity to distance themselves from the consequences of that movement. Others remain materially exposed to the risks produced by privileged mobility.

The automobile is therefore significant not because it “represents” modern America from the outside, but because it provides American writers with a mechanism for testing some of modernity’s most powerful promises. It converts freedom into movement, movement into visibility, and visibility into desire. Yet it also reveals that autonomy is never purely individual. Every act of accelerated movement takes place within a social world structured by unequal capacities to move, to control, to consume, and to escape consequences. This article consequently argues that collision is not external to automotive modernity but constitutes its immanent limit. The crash does not merely mark the failure of technological freedom; it makes visible the inequalities on

which that freedom has depended all along. Reading Wharton, Dreiser, and Fitzgerald together thus reveals the automobile as both a machine of self-making and a machine of social differentiation: a technology that expands the imaginable range of individual freedom while exposing the privilege, vulnerability, and violence embedded within that freedom.

“The Pleasure of Acceleration”: Speed and the Modern Sensorium in *The Custom of the Country*

In Wharton’s novel, automotive speed is not a decorative sign of modern life. It produces a temporary sensorium in which cold, motion, visibility, and social privilege combine to suspend ethical memory. The pleasure of acceleration is therefore already inseparable from unequal access and from the displacement of other claims upon the subject.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the motorcar’s most concentrated appearance occurs not in a spectacle of mechanical mastery but in a brief, ethically compromised ride. Leaving a portrait studio with Peter Van Degen, the heroine Undine Marvell accepts his invitation to travel in his open car through Central Park and north along the Boulevard. The passage is easily reduced to a familiar contrast: Undine’s husband Ralph’s domestic restraint versus Van Degen’s moneyed freedom. Yet Wharton’s prose makes a more exacting claim. It stages speed as a reordering of attention. The car changes what Undine can feel, what she can remember, and what becomes temporarily inaudible to her. In doing so, it gives literary form to a central tension of automotive modernity: velocity appears as private liberation precisely because it can interrupt the social and ethical relations that remain materially in force.

The scene begins with a problem of access rather than a simple appetite for motion. Undine’s residence on West End Avenue leaves her socially exposed: she is “avowedly dependent on ‘lifts’,” obliged to solicit them and ashamed to be seen in a cab (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). Mobility is already a matter of distinction. The automobile does not simply take her from one address to another; it distinguishes the person who can extend

a lift from the person who must seek one. Van Degen's offer—"If you don't mind the open car"—accordingly has a double force. It promises fresh air and speed, but it also temporarily repairs the social embarrassment of Undine's location. Her pleasure cannot be abstracted from this arrangement of privilege. She experiences automotive freedom as a passenger because another man owns the vehicle, controls its route, and can transform a practical need into an occasion of intimacy.

Wharton sharpens this dependence by setting the motorcar against Ralph's commute. As Van Degen laughs, Ralph is still "swinging on a strap in the elevated" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The phrase compresses an entire hierarchy of movement. Van Degen's open automobile affords choice, exposure, and a mobile enclosure for flirtation; Ralph's body is held upright in a public system, subject to its crowding and timetable. The comparison is not merely between old and new transportation. It distinguishes an embodied autonomy from a managed, collective mobility. Sheller and Urry's (2000) account of automobility as a system rather than an isolated machine is useful here: the car's apparent individuality depends upon infrastructures, social practices, and unequal permissions that its private interior obscures (pp. 737–757). Wharton's scene does not need to name those systems in order to show their social effect. A ride becomes available to Undine as an elite favor, while Ralph's public transit is made into the comic background against which that favor acquires glamour.

The sensory grammar of the ride converts this hierarchy into pleasure. "The winter twilight was deliriously cold," Wharton writes, and the pair "swept through Central Park" before gathering "impetus" for their "northward flight" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The sentence moves through a sequence of intensifying verbs—"swept," "gathered," "flight"—that makes the automobile less an object than a force distributed across body, weather, and urban space. Cold is not a condition to be endured; it becomes "delirious," an adjective that names both stimulation and a loosening of ordinary judgment. The open car abolishes the comfortable boundary between passenger and environment, yet it does so under the protection of fur and wealth. Exposure here is a luxury. Undine can treat the weather as sensation because the car, the driver, and the clothing convert possible discomfort into a consumable intensity.

The sentence's central claim is even more striking: Undine feels "the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). Wharton does not say that speed merely distracts her. The verbs are violent and acoustic. "Drowns" submerges moral hesitation; "silences" deprives memory of a voice. Acceleration alters the relation between sensation and conscience by making the body's present tense louder than its obligations. The immediate context specifies what has been suppressed. Undine has a vague sense of a forgotten engagement, and the ride will make her late for her son Paul's birthday. The automobile thus does not deliver her from responsibility in any literal sense; it gives her an experience in which responsibility is temporarily unavailable as a felt claim. Speed is a technology of selective attention.

This passage complicates an account of automotive experience that locates its novelty solely in visual perception. Duffy (2022) argues that the automobile put the senses under new pressure and made seeing at speed a distinctive problem for modernist representation. Wharton's prose shares that concern with the sensorium, but it assigns no stable, panoramic gaze to Undine. The city darkens; the vehicle's movement is rendered through cold, impetus, and flight; the decisive transformation happens within attention and memory. Rather than mastering a rapidly passing scene, Undine is mastered by a kinetic atmosphere. The effect is close to what Pearce (2016) calls automotive consciousness: a driving-event can organize affect and thought as well as physical motion. But Wharton's passenger makes visible an important qualification. Automotive consciousness is not necessarily consciousness at the wheel. It may be a delegated experience, produced by another's control of the car and entangled with a gendered economy of invitation, display, and dependence.

The car nevertheless grants Undine a form of agency, although it is an agency inseparable from calculation. The narrator observes that she wants pleasure while retaining the strategic distance that will keep Van Degen's interest profitable: her impatience is "curbed by an instinct for holding off and biding her time" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The passage refuses to make her an innocent victim of sensation. She is actively reading the ride as a social opportunity. Yet the syntax of speed keeps

undermining this calculation. “Now and then youth had its way,” the narrator remarks; “she could not always resist the present pleasure” (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The motorcar’s promise lies in its capacity to make the present feel self-justifying. It is not only fast; it supplies a temporal ideology in which immediate sensation seems to outrank deferred consequence.

That temporal ideology is registered in Wharton’s repetition of “flew.” As the motor moves through icy twilight, “her present cares flew with it” (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The metaphor treats anxiety as detachable cargo. It imagines that the self can travel beyond its own liabilities, even as the next sentence admits that the worries remain: the expensive fancy dress still presses on Undine’s mind. Van Degen’s response is revealing. He lowers the car’s speed, not because the ride is dangerous, but because he wishes to hear and manage the confession that the ride has made possible. The vehicle has produced an intimate interval in which finance, desire, and motion become mutually legible. His offer to supply “a couple of thou” turns the accelerated sensorium back into exchange (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The ride is pleasurable because it seems to suspend material pressure; it is useful to Van Degen because it exposes precisely the pressure he can exploit.

The car’s visual afterimage completes this conversion of sensation into social drama. Ralph, waiting at home, first sees “the blazing lamps of a large touring-car” bearing furiously down the avenue; only as it slows does he recognize Undine and Van Degen (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). From within the car, speed has blurred memory and scruple. From the street and the window, it becomes a spectacle: light, bulk, fur, and movement announce a social relation before the occupants’ faces become clear. Wharton thus distributes the automobile’s perception across unequal positions. For Undine, its open body turns cold into exhilaration. For Ralph, its lamps make a distant sign of exclusion and suspicion. His later view of Undine’s “blown hair and glowing face” records the bodily residue of acceleration, but it cannot establish what has happened inside the vehicle. The car creates a privileged zone of partial visibility. It displays wealth and mobility while withholding the intimacy it facilitates.

This asymmetry helps explain why the episode must not be treated as a simple

celebration of female mobility. Van Degen's car enables Undine to move beyond the confinement of West End Avenue, but she neither owns nor drives it. Her mobility is socially real and affectively potent, yet it is conditional on male possession. Seiler's (2008) history of automobility shows how driving became bound to American ideals of agency and citizenship even while those ideals were unevenly distributed. Wharton's scene anticipates that contradiction in miniature. Undine's access to speed gives her a felt sense of autonomy, but the vehicle's control, its money, and even the moral risk of being seen with Van Degen remain external to her. The open car intensifies her bodily freedom at the same moment that it makes her more dependent upon the man who can provide it.

The episode also clarifies the section's place in the article's larger sequence. In this novel, acceleration is not yet collision, and Wharton does not turn the motorcar into an allegory of crash. Instead, she locates a prior violence in the redistribution of attention. The pleasure of speed makes domestic obligation, financial strain, and class dependence temporarily less audible; its apparent freedom rests on this sensory exclusion. Wharton's motorcar is therefore a machine for producing a modern self that feels briefly unencumbered because it has learned to experience other people's claims as background noise. The scene's ethical force lies in its refusal to separate exhilaration from that refusal. "Physical joy" is real, but it is real as the very medium through which memory is silenced.

Read in this light, *The Custom of the Country* gives automotive modernity an origin point more complex than the arrival of a new status object. The automobile transforms the novel's sensorium: it converts cold into stimulus, urban distance into flight, obligation into a temporary silence, and class privilege into an apparently private feeling of release. Yet its freedom remains relational and conditional. Undine can enjoy the present only because another person directs the vehicle and because Ralph's labor, Paul's disappointment, and her own debts are displaced from the car's immediate field of sensation. Wharton thus makes speed the first term of a larger structure. Once acceleration has trained the subject to mistake selective attention for autonomy, desire

can appear as the natural continuation of mobility rather than as the social relation that sustains it.

“Mobile Visibility”: Automobile Consumption and Social Desire in *An American Tragedy*

In Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, the automobile matters not because it is an unusually expensive possession, but because it makes possession publicly mobile. A house may certify comfort; a car carries its certificate of wealth through streets, parks, and country roads, where it can be seen, desired, and entered. Dreiser understands this difference with unusual precision. For the hero Clyde Griffiths, who begins the novel within the constraining visibility of his parents’ evangelical street mission, the motorcar offers a different regime of appearance. It promises not merely transport but a way of being recognized before one has acquired the stable income, family name, or social ease that recognition ordinarily presupposes. The car is therefore a privileged object of what may be called mobile visibility: the conversion of economic advantage into a moving, shareable spectacle of social possibility.

This concept clarifies why the automobile repeatedly concentrates the novel’s concerns with class aspiration, erotic desire, and moral evasion. Veblen’s account of conspicuous consumption remains useful here, provided that it is not treated as a flat label for luxury. For Veblen (1899), consumption is social because it solicits comparison; goods acquire force when they make pecuniary standing legible to others. Dreiser’s car, however, does more than display ownership. It arranges bodies in relation to one another: a driver commands direction and pace, passengers borrow access to a classed world, pedestrians become an obstructing public, and a secluded road seems to suspend supervision. The automobile’s visibility is thus double. It exhibits status in public while creating a provisional private interior. Clyde is drawn to precisely this conjunction of display and enclosure, because it allows him to imagine that social ascent can be performed before it is achieved.

The novel’s first decisive automobile episode makes that fantasy inseparable from danger. At the Kansas City hotel, Clyde’s new wage, new clothes, and new companions

expose him to a culture in which leisure appears as an immediately purchasable social identity. Sparser's unauthorized joyride in his employer's car is not an incidental youthful diversion. It is a condensed lesson in how the automobile confers borrowed rank. Clyde enters a vehicle whose ownership and authority belong elsewhere, yet the journey temporarily lets its occupants inhabit the speed, rural privacy, and sexual license associated with a more privileged life. Hortense's presence intensifies the scene's social logic: she is not simply an object of Clyde's desire, but a spectator whose desire helps define which commodities count as signs of arrival. The car becomes a stage on which the young men can present themselves as men of means, even though the performance rests on theft, credit, and imitation.

Dreiser's narration makes this imitation psychologically powerful because Clyde's longing is never for a single object in isolation. He wants the car as part of a synchronized image: stylish clothes, a desirable companion, leisure removed from work, and the apparent authority to take a road wherever it leads. The episode therefore gives material form to the novel's recurrent distinction between possessing an identity and occupying its surface. Clyde does not ask what the car costs, how it is maintained, or what social obligations accompany it. He experiences it as a visible shortcut across those questions. If the city hotel had taught him that clothes can revise the body's social meaning, the motorcar teaches him that movement can revise it too. To be driven away from the city is to become, for a few hours, someone not fixed by the family mission, the factory wage, or the limits of one's address.

The accident that ends the outing shatters this borrowed autonomy without entirely dispelling its appeal. Sparser, driving too fast, strikes a child and flees; Clyde and the others become complicit in the flight. The scene is an early instance of the novel's larger tragic pattern, but its importance is not exhausted by foreshadowing. The car's promise of unregulated movement instantly produces a distribution of vulnerability. Its occupants possess speed, a machine, and the option of departure; the child has none of these forms of protection. What looks, from inside the car, like liberation from ordinary constraints becomes, from the roadside, the imposition of another person's privilege.

The episode suggests that automotive freedom is never simply individual. It depends on shared spaces in which the driver's capacity to move rapidly can expose less mobile bodies to risk. This is why the later collision in the novel cannot be understood as a sudden moral deviation. Dreiser has already made the car a technology through which desire and differential exposure are organized together.

That organization becomes more elaborate in *Lycurgus*. Clyde's appointment at his uncle's collar factory appears to offer a genuine route into bourgeois respectability, but the novel repeatedly shows that his new position does not supply the signs by which he wants to be recognized. He has a room, a salary, and relatives of wealth; still, he remains uncertain of how to convert proximity to the Griffiths family into membership in its world. The automobile becomes crucial because it seems to solve this problem of conversion. It translates capital into an immediately intelligible public form. In the factory and on the street, cars do not simply reveal that some characters have money; they display that money as ease, movement, and command over time. Clyde's desire is correspondingly mimetic. He does not seek a car merely for practical travel. He seeks the social legibility carried by its polished surface, its capacity to draw attention, and its ability to place its occupants visibly above those who must walk, wait, or work.

This is the novel's most important revision of the familiar American dream of mobility. Social mobility conventionally implies a gradual movement between classes, secured through labor, education, inheritance, or marriage. Automotive mobility offers a more seductive substitute: movement through space can be made to resemble movement through the social order. When Clyde is present in the cars and excursions of the young *Lycurgus* set, he can appear to have crossed a boundary that he has not, in fact, crossed. His access is contingent, relational, and often borrowed, but the spectacle minimizes those distinctions. As Sheller and Urry (2000) argue, automobility is not reducible to an individual's relation to a machine; it is a socio-technical system that combines movement with social practice, spatial organization, and differentiated access. Dreiser's fiction anticipates this insight at the scale of social perception. The car matters because it makes its occupant visible within an ensemble of roads, leisure, romance, and class observation.

Sondra Finchley is central to that ensemble. Her wealth is attractive to Clyde not simply because it is stored in property or family reputation, but because it appears in occasions of movement: visits, drives, parties, country houses, and the effortless circulation of an affluent group. In Sondra's company, the car extends the social world that Clyde wants to enter. It can bear him toward secluded recreation, stage his apparent intimacy with people of rank, and temporarily remove him from the factory discipline that defines his actual position. The novel's emphasis on invitations and excursions is consequential. These are not neutral settings for romance. They are the mechanisms through which social desire becomes spatial. Clyde learns to desire Sondra's world as a sequence of accessible scenes, each one made possible by vehicles, money, and the leisure to travel without economic necessity.

The phrase mobile visibility names the fragile power of those scenes. A vehicle makes wealth visible because it moves; yet its very movement makes visibility dependent on repetition, spectatorship, and continued access. Clyde has to be invited, driven, dressed, and seen again. He is not stabilized by any of the signs he borrows. His position remains anxious precisely because the automobile turns status into a performance that can be entered but not necessarily possessed. Seiler's (2008) cultural history of automobility helps articulate the ideological pressure at work: American driving has been closely tied to fantasies of agency and self-direction, even though driving is enabled and limited by infrastructures, regulations, and unequal social resources. Clyde's automotive desire is an acute fictional version of this contradiction. The mobility he experiences feels self-making, while almost every condition that enables it belongs to someone else.

This contradiction also explains why Dreiser links cars so persistently to heterosexual desire. The automobile's enclosed interior produces a private-looking space, while its mobility makes that space detachable from home and family surveillance. It offers Clyde not only the chance to be seen with a desirable woman but also the chance to imagine that intimacy itself can be accelerated, transported, and made available on demand. Yet the car's erotic function is inseparable from class. In the early

Kansas City episode, the vehicle gives a group of precariously employed young people an imitation of elite leisure. In *Lycurgus*, it mediates Clyde's longing for Sondra by allowing him to participate in the privileged circulation of her social circle. Automobility therefore reorganizes romance as a question of access: who can enter the car, choose the route, afford the outing, and leave the city behind.

Roberta Alden exposes the violence concealed by this arrangement. She is not simply the obstacle to Clyde's preferred future with Sondra; she is a worker whose relation to mobility is structurally unlike his fantasy of mobility. The factory brings Clyde and Roberta into proximity, but the car and the lake route that follow do not offer them equal possibilities. Clyde's imagined escape depends on treating movement as a private solution to a social problem: pregnancy, employment, class hierarchy, and reputation are to be resolved by going elsewhere. Such a fantasy becomes thinkable because the automobile promises detachable space. A car can leave the city; a boat can leave the shore; the individual can imagine that responsibility will remain behind. But Dreiser refuses that fantasy's clean separation. The novel's later lake episode is prepared by the earlier hit-and-run: in both, a more mobile subject mistakes the capacity to depart for the right to distribute danger onto a more vulnerable body.

This is not to say that Dreiser turns the automobile into a simple emblem of evil. The car is compelling because it gives material form to a real desire for release from social confinement. Clyde's attraction to movement is intelligible; it responds to the humiliations of poverty, religious respectability, and class exclusion. What the novel exposes is the way consumer culture channels that desire into objects whose social meaning depends on being seen and envied. The automobile is exceptional in this regard because it does not merely represent wealth. It performs wealth in motion. It lets privilege appear as personal charisma, and it makes borrowed access feel, momentarily, like self-possession.

Dreiser's narrative technique is especially sharp on this point. Its patient accumulation of material details does not allow commodities to settle into mere background. Clothes, hotel wages, taxis, automobiles, country clubs, and rooms repeatedly mediate the difference between what Clyde is and what he imagines himself

becoming. The novel's long social descriptions create a rhythm of deferred arrival: each new object or invitation seems to bring Clyde nearer to the world he wants, while also showing that he remains dependent on the judgments and resources of others. Automobile consumption intensifies that rhythm because the car collapses waiting time. It supplies the sensation of arrival before arrival has occurred. One can drive into the country, appear beside the right woman, or occupy a more expensive social scene without possessing the durable class position that those appearances conventionally signify.

The result is a distinctive account of social desire. Clyde does not desire wealth as a static end state; he desires its circulation, its visibility, and its promise that a different self can be made legible in public. Mobile visibility is therefore not simply conspicuous consumption with wheels. It is a narrative mechanism through which the automobile binds together looking, being looked at, sexual aspiration, and imagined class ascent. The car is at once a commodity, a social theater, and an instrument of evasion. It permits Clyde to picture life as a series of routes away from the conditions that formed him, even as each route remains shaped by the wealth and vulnerability of others.

In this sense, *An American Tragedy* gives "desire" its full social weight. After the sensory exhilaration of speed, desire takes form as the wish to convert movement into status and status into a new self. But the novel also makes clear why this conversion cannot remain innocent. The more the car allows Clyde to experience autonomy as visible consumption, the more it teaches him to treat shared social space as material for private advancement. The subsequent catastrophe is thus not a break with automotive desire but its grim extension. By rendering wealth mobile, Dreiser shows how the automobile can make social aspiration appear frictionless while transferring its costs onto bodies with less power to move, refuse, or be seen.

"The Violence of Freedom": Collision and Unequal Vulnerability in *The Great Gatsby*

The car crash in *The Great Gatsby* is often read as Fitzgerald's moral reckoning with the heedless rich. That reading is necessary but incomplete. Myrtle Wilson's death does

not interrupt an otherwise emancipatory culture of automotive freedom; it brings into focus the unequal distribution of danger that makes that freedom possible. In the larger trajectory of this article—from speed to desire to collision—Fitzgerald’s novel stages the final term as the immanent limit of the first two. The sensations and display-value attached to the automobile do not disappear in the collision. They are converted into force: the speed that promises self-direction and the desirability that turns wealth into public spectacle become lethal when exercised within a shared space whose users do not possess equal mobility, protection, or credibility. The novel’s cars therefore disclose what the rhetoric of autonomous driving suppresses: freedom on the road is never simply private, because its consequences are borne by other bodies.

This contradiction is especially sharp in an American context in which driving had become a language of agency. Cotten Seiler (2008) argues that automobility helped make driving an emblem of freedom, self-direction, and citizenship, while Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2000, pp. 737–739) describe the car not as an isolated object but as a system of infrastructures, practices, and social relations. Fitzgerald’s fiction grants the automobile precisely this systemic significance. Cars connect the Eggs to Manhattan and the valley of ashes; they sort passengers into owners, drivers, riders, pedestrians, and victims; and they make wealth materially visible. Yet the novel gives the apparent freedom of movement a distinctive social geometry. Those able to command speed may exit a scene, alter its story, or evade its consequences. Those exposed at the roadside remain vulnerable to the effects of some one else’s movement. Collision is thus not only an event in the plot but a form through which class power becomes bodily legible.

The novel prepares this argument long before Myrtle’s death through its recurrent association of driving with carelessness. Jordan Baker, whom Nick identifies as an incurably careless driver, offers the most explicit formulation. When challenged about her bad driving, she replies that other people will keep out of her way; Nick observes that “it takes two to make an accident” (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 3). The sentence is memorable because it is both true and evasive. An accident does involve more than one body, but Jordan turns that mutuality into an alibi. Her safety depends on other people’s vigilance, their ability to anticipate her error, and their willingness to yield space to her. The phrase “keep out of the way” treats the road as if it were organized around the driver’s desire rather than around reciprocal obligation. Jordan’s carelessness is not

mere individual incompetence. It is a social disposition enabled by the expectation that others will absorb the costs of her freedom.

Nick's early description of Jordan makes the point still more exact. He calls her "incurably dishonest," but links that dishonesty to a bodily poise: she avoids "clever, shrewd men" because she would rather preserve the advantage of a managed surface (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 3). Driving gives this ethic a practical form. The automobile turns individual desire into motion, but it also allows that motion to be insulated by the car's body, by money, and by the deferential adjustments of others. As Lynne Pearce (2016, pp. 1–6) suggests, "automotive consciousness" reorganizes attention and affect around a specific event of movement. Fitzgerald's novel darkens that proposition. Its drivers do not merely inhabit a new sensorium; they inhabit an unequal sensorium, one in which privilege can convert the road from a zone of shared risk into a stage for personal indifference.

The orange-yellow Rolls-Royce that carries Gatsby's guests makes the connection between visibility and danger literal. Earlier in the article, Dreiser's automobile was understood as "mobile visibility": a commodity that carries class aspiration through public space. Gatsby's car radicalizes that function. Nick sees it as a "rich cream color, bright with nickel," its "monstrous length" extending through the scene as a spectacle of abundance (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 4). The description emphasizes not private utility but excess made mobile. Gatsby's vehicle is a moving advertisement for his arrival, a machine for converting wealth into an immediately readable public image. It also produces interpretive confusion: the car's owner, driver, and passengers may be misidentified, while its glamour persuades observers to treat mechanical power as a sign of personal consequence. The commodity does not merely reflect Gatsby's social identity; it makes that identity circulate, compete, and appear credible.

This visibility has an erotic and aspirational charge. Myrtle's relation to Tom is organized by the possibility of entering the mobile world from which the valley of ashes excludes her. The first encounter that Nick recounts occurs on a train, but the affair is sustained by a pattern of transfers, purchases, and excursions that oppose the Wilsons' immobilized existence to the mobility of the wealthy (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 2). The garage is accordingly more than a background. It is a threshold between the world that

services automobiles and the world that possesses them. George Wilson works amid the machinery of mobility without gaining its freedom; Myrtle imagines that her attachment to Tom might carry her across that division. The novel's class politics are concentrated in this spatial arrangement. The wealthy enter and leave the valley at speed. The Wilsons remain exposed to their passage and dependent upon the economic system that their cars animate.

By the time of the accident, Gatsby's car has accumulated these meanings of speed, display, and social desire. Daisy drives it after the confrontation at the Plaza, and Myrtle runs toward the road, apparently believing that the yellow car can restore contact with the world of wealth and escape it has come to signify. Fitzgerald refuses the consoling clarity of an intentional murder. Nick reports that the car "came out of the gathering darkness" and then "disappeared around the next bend" after striking Myrtle (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 7). The language makes the vehicle momentarily impersonal: color and motion precede accountable agency. But this impersonal appearance is exactly the effect the novel interrogates. A car may seem to become an autonomous force at speed, yet it is still embedded in decisions about who drives, who may be protected, whose testimony will matter, and whose death can be narrated as a regrettable outcome rather than a demand for justice.

The collision produces an asymmetry between the driver's enclosure and the pedestrian's exposure. Daisy is inside the expensive machine, surrounded by its mass and its social authority; Myrtle is in the road, a body without comparable protection. This opposition is neither incidental nor reducible to a moral contrast between two women. It dramatizes a social distribution of vulnerability. Sheller and Urry (2000, pp. 739–741) emphasize that automobility reorganizes public space and the possibilities of social encounter. In Fitzgerald, the road is not a neutral common ground. It is a surface on which the mobility of the privileged becomes dangerous precisely because the less privileged must inhabit it without the same resources for withdrawal, repair, or narrative control. Myrtle's death makes visible the bodily risk that the language of automotive freedom normally leaves unseen.

The scenes immediately after the crash show that unequal vulnerability extends beyond the impact itself. Daisy does not stop; Gatsby offers to assume responsibility; Tom identifies the yellow car to Wilson while withholding the crucial fact that Daisy

was driving; and Wilson, supplied with a simplified story, directs violence toward Gatsby. The issue is not that Fitzgerald lets Daisy escape through a technicality. It is that escape is structured through a chain of substitutions. Gatsby's name can stand in for Daisy's action, the car can stand in for Gatsby, and Myrtle's death can be folded into the panic and property relations of the wealthy. This is the novel's most devastating account of impunity: social privilege operates not only as the ability to avoid punishment but as the ability to determine what, and who, counts as the cause.

Nick's final verdict on Tom and Daisy gives this process its moral language: they are "careless people" who smash things and creatures and then retreat "back into their money" (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 9). The phrase is often treated as the novel's summary condemnation of the Buchanans. It should also be read as a theory of automotive power. To retreat into money is to retreat into a protective infrastructure: wealth supplies automobiles, domestic spaces, lawyers, social credibility, and the capacity to leave town. Carelessness is therefore not simply a character flaw; it names the capacity to externalize consequences. The collision is an automotive event because it exposes the uneven relation between the person who initiates dangerous movement and the people compelled to endure its aftermath.

This reading also clarifies why Gatsby cannot be treated as a simple counterfigure to the Buchanans. He is more solicitous toward Daisy and more willing to accept blame, but his yellow car remains the instrument through which he has made himself visible to the world that Daisy inhabits. His longing is inseparable from the conspicuous mobility that promises access to East Egg. The novel therefore links Gatsby's romantic idealism to the same commodity form that makes Myrtle's desire fatal. Each character is drawn toward the automobile's promise that a new direction, a more brilliant surface, or a faster passage might become a different social self. Fitzgerald's tragedy lies in showing that this promise is not equally available and that, even when it appears available, it is sustained by forms of exclusion that the crash renders undeniable.

Enda Duffy (2022, pp. 78–90) argues that the automobile's early cultural force involved an unstable mixture of consumer celebration, sensory intensity, and terror. *The Great Gatsby* gives that instability a sharply classed narrative form. The novel does not oppose pleasure to violence as if the crash merely corrected an excessive faith in speed.

Rather, it shows pleasure and violence to be continuous. Gatsby's car is desirable because it is powerful, visible, and capable of transforming space; it becomes violent because those same capacities are exercised in a world marked by unequal access to protection. Collision is thus the immanent limit of automotive freedom: the moment when freedom's dependence on infrastructure, privilege, and other people's vulnerability becomes impossible to ignore.

The article's movement from speed to desire to collision consequently reaches its fullest articulation here. Wharton's speeding car made modern sensation inseparable from privilege; Dreiser's automobiles turned commodities into moving claims upon status; Fitzgerald's crash reveals the social violence latent in both processes. The car's promise of self-making culminates not in sovereign autonomy but in a scene where one person's mobility becomes another person's bodily ruin. In this sense, *The Great Gatsby* does not merely symbolize the moral decay of the Jazz Age. It tests a central fantasy of American modernity: that technological movement can be privately owned, privately enjoyed, and privately escaped. The novel's answer is severe. No movement is private once it enters a shared world; the freedom to accelerate always creates a question of who must get out of the way.

Conclusion: The Limits of Automotive Freedom

The automobile occupies a uniquely contradictory position in early twentieth-century American literature. It represents speed, freedom, and self-directed movement, yet it also reveals the social inequalities and bodily risks embedded within modern mobility. Reading Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* together demonstrates that the literary meaning of the automobile cannot be reduced to a simple symbol of technological progress or material prosperity. Rather, the automobile functions as a cultural mechanism through which modern experiences of perception, desire, identity, and vulnerability are produced.

The automobile thus transforms a central American ideal—the belief that freedom consists in the ability to choose one's own direction—into a technological fantasy of acceleration. It offers individuals the possibility of controlling movement, displaying success, and imagining self-creation. Yet the literature examined here repeatedly

challenges this fantasy by showing that mobility is never purely individual. Every act of movement takes place within social structures shaped by class, gender, wealth, and unequal exposure to risk. The broader significance of automotive modernity lies precisely in this tension. The automobile expands the possibilities of individual freedom while simultaneously revealing the limits of that freedom. It allows characters to move more quickly, desire more intensely, and imagine greater possibilities for self-transformation, but it also exposes the dependencies and inequalities beneath those aspirations. In this sense, the automobile becomes not merely a machine of transportation but a literary instrument for examining the contradictions of American modernity.

Ultimately, early twentieth-century American fiction does not reject the automobile as a symbol of progress; instead, it reveals the complexity of the freedom that the automobile promises. Speed produces new forms of perception, mobility generates new forms of desire, and desire ultimately encounters the vulnerability of bodies in collision. The automobile's greatest literary significance therefore lies not in its ability to represent modern freedom, but in its ability to reveal what that freedom costs. As these novels suggest, collision is not external to automotive modernity—it is its internal limit. The crash makes visible the social relations, inequalities, and vulnerabilities that acceleration attempts to conceal. Through the automobile, American literature captures both the excitement of modern movement and the unresolved contradictions that accompany it.

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