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The Corrupt Scapegoat

In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald explores the innate, widespread racism of those living in the 1920s. Most particularly in reference to Nick’s “unbiased” perception of Wolfsheim’s features, Fitzgerald demonstrates the inherent anti-Semitism prevalent in the era by depicting the most “unbiased” character in the story as unaware of his branding and discrimination of Wolfsheim.

Despite his insistence that he is impartial, Nick describes Wolfsheim as “A small, flat-nosed Jew” (69). The immediate observation of Wolfsheim's Jewish nose and stout stature reveals Nick's tendency to characterize people using stereotypes. Then, Nick uses synecdoche by saying that Wolfsheim’s “expressive nose” is speaking or acting rather than Wolfsheim himself. For instance, he says that Wolfsheim “regarded [him] with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril,” dehumanizing Wolfsheim by drawing the reader’s attention to Wolfsheim’s enormous, piliferous nostrils (69). Furthermore, the way Wolfsheim’s nose hairs “luxuriate” reflects the prolific, thriving lifestyle that Wolfsheim lives. However, nose hair suggests filth. In contrast to most noses, which keep their hair concealed within themselves, Wolfsheim’s nose underscores his implied lifestyle of dirty dealings which he cannot hide from Nick. Wolfsheim’s Jewish nose, correlated with a dubious integrity, also reflects the characteristic of sinful greed associated with all Jews at the time. Thus, Nick’s disdain for Wolfsheim, and the race he represents, is further encouraged.

Wolfsheim’s words indeed confirm what his nose reveals. First, Wolfsheim talks to Gatsby about a transaction with another person in which Wolfsheim would not pay "him a penny till he shuts his mouth" (69). This bribery-tainted business deal illuminates Wolfsheim's nefarious, savage nature. Nick is further appalled when Gatsby tells him Wolfsheim “fixed the World Series of 1919,” saying that “it never occurred to [him] that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe” (73). Since it was perceived that most Jews took on the “dishonest” occupation of a banker, Nick parallels this historical situation with how multitudes put their money in Wolfsheim’s people and are ultimately manipulated by the bankers who, instead of safeguarding their money, plunder the profits of their blind trust and make their escape. Even Wolfsheim’s name confirms his nature of depravity and barbarism: the word "wolf" suggests a ruthless predator, and the pronunciation of "sheim" sounds like the latter half of a word prevalent at the time, “moonshine,” the very drink which Wolfsheim revolves his illegal business around. Thus, Wolfsheim is established as the symbolic representative of the criminal aspects found in the novel, which Nick correlates to the criminality of Wolfsheim’s race as a whole.

Furthermore, Nick learns that Wolfsheim’s illicit business is named the “Swastika Holding Company,” an apparent throwback to the Nazi regime during the Second World War (170). Although the modern reader’s kneejerk reaction is to be stunned by the irony of a Jewish business under the symbol of Nazi tyranny, Fitzgerald wrote the book before Hitler’s rise to power; at the time, the swastika was an Aryan symbol for good luck. Thus, in depicting a foreigner using an Aryan symbol for his corrupt business, Fitzgerald reveals the threat upon American values and society posed by foreign immigrants. Moreover, Nick notes that Wolfsheim’s secretary, a “lovely Jewess” has “black, hostile eyes,” illuminating the caution those in his company must have in order to not reveal the inner workings of the fraudulent company (170). Thus, the company Wolfsheim establishes symbolizes the perceived threat of the Jewish race against nativist Americans in the 1920’s.

In crafting Wolfsheim’s character as the embodiment of what Americans perceived Jews to be, Fitzgerald portrays the overall attitude of the American population towards the Jewish people through Nick’s discomfort around the man, underscoring his inherent prejudice. If the most unbiased character is bigoted against Wolfsheim, it is logical to conclude that the whole of the American population must discriminate against the Jewish race. The motif of Wolfsheim’s character thus serves to illuminate the insidious moral decay prevalent in the era which eventually manifested itself into the Holocaust.