Cityscape and Tragedy
In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

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Kim, Yeonman. “Cityscape and Tragedy in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.” *Modern Studies in English Language and Literature* 60.1 (2016): 307-18. F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) has long been read as a critique of materialistic capitalism that uncovers the collapse of the American Dream. The reader may stretch this cultural mode of interpretation further into the New Historicism level and conclude that the urban setting of the novel plays a crucial role as a backdrop in understanding the tragic development of the central plot. On the backdrop of the novel lies the modern megalopolis of New York City along with its skyscrapers, roads, automobiles, billboard, waste dump, etc. The exploration of these features of the backdrop leads to the acknowledgement that the tragedy of the novel is the tragedy of a big city of the early twentieth century. Rather than focus on the foregrounded central plot of the novel, this paper delves into the specific elements of the cultural background in the American 1920s. The exploration of the backdrop will in turn help the reader to better understand the tragedy of *The Great Gatsby*. (Hanbat National University)

**Key Words:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, modernity, city, American 1920s

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*The Great Gatsby* (1925) is no doubt considered F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)’s best novel; moreover, it is often considered one of the world’s greatest modern classics. Why is that? one may ask. The answer probably lies in the greatness of the novel as both universal and specific in terms of time. This dualism must have served as a driving force for
the novel’s immediate and on-going success. Nicolas Tredell sums up the ambivalent quality of the novel: “while *Gatsby* certainly transcends its time, it is also, like any enduring work of art, very much of its time, emerging in, representing and contributing to a very specific historical context” (9). The rather universal concepts of capitalism and materialism are projected within a specific time frame of the American 1920s in the novel. Hence, there has been a great deal of scholarship pertinent to the specific cultural details of 1920s America as well as the transcendental themes of capitalism and materialism.

Yet to take one step further, one may note that the novel is a product not only of a specific time but also of a specific place—that is, New York City. In this sense, it is meaningful to examine not only the temporal features of the so-called “Roaring Twenties” and “Jazz Age” but also the spacial features of the novel as presented in its backdrop, though perhaps trifling in the development of the plot. In understanding the cultural aspects of a literary work, one may benefit from setting aside provisionally what is foregrounded as part of its embossed central plot structure but then scrutinizing its background incidents and, as if presented on stage, the features of its backdrop and props. As such, a New Historicist study of the cityscape of *The Great Gatsby* presented as its backdrop may lead to a new way of interpreting the novel. The strong presence of a modern megalopolis dominates the mood of the backdrop. In this aspect, the novel may not just be a tragedy of the collapse of the American Dream as has often been maintained; it is rather a tragedy of a modern American city.

American culture of the 1920s as portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* can be summed up in one word: cityscape. In other words, understanding the cityscape of the novel is the key to understanding the entire work. New York City serves as the primary backdrop on which new skyscrapers and