In the Hamptons

by Gary Percesepe

Beach & Social Class

Since the time that our children were babies S and I have taken August vacations on Long Island, in the Hamptons. It is an odd choice for people living in the Midwest; our neighbors and friends in Illinois (where we lived once upon a time) and Ohio (where I reside now, a New Yorker in exile) retreat to the Ozarks or, farther afield, the Gulf Coast of Texas or Florida, or Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. (For those who desire something more upscale, the middle of the middlebrow: Hilton Head.) At the beaches, inns, and restaurants of the Hamptons there are no Ohio license plates in the parking lots. It is long way from Myrtle Beach to East Hampton, and I don't mean the mileage.

Class differences in New York (and if you believe F. Scott Fitzgerald, in America, generally) are best viewed from the beach.

As a rule of thumb, the closer a beach is to New York City, the more "undesirable" it is. The beaches of Brooklyn and Queens teem with ethnic diversity. In the dog days of summer there are hordes of people, packed in so tightly there seems to be little open sand. The music is loud, the sexuality seething. Beaches are "public," and the suntan lotion of choice is oil. Orchard Beach, Jones Beach, Brighton Beach, Rockaway— *Forgeddabouddit***.** The farther from the city one goes, moving east on Long Island into Suffolk County, the more "desirable" and homogeneous the beaches become. Skin is lighter, expensive sunscreens are in evidence, beaches are private and accessible by resorts and single family houses, and music is muted, if it is present at all. Swim suits are modest, nannies are in evidence at the tonier resorts, and a certain "space" between beachgoers is observed.

Americans have always found it difficult to talk about social class, believing, as we do, that our true destination and station in life is the class above our own. Put simply, Americans are conflicted about money. They want it and admire and envy those who have it, but

they don't want to be seen *appearing* to want it, and are naturally suspicious of anyone who has it and claims not to want it, or does not have it and seems to like it that way. It is difficult in this country to organize the "have-nots" against the "haves," precisely because the "have-nots" see themselves as one day becoming the "haves." American politicians who run populist campaigns are regularly accused of engaging in "class warfare," a cardinal sin in contemporary American public life. The few who actually ran populist campaigns have generally been southern pols including such figures as Huey Long, Jimmy Carter, Sen. Albert Gore, Sr. (D-Tennessee), and his son, Al, Junior (remember "The People Against The Powerful?") They all eventually lost, with an asterisk for Al Gore in the 2000 presidential contest, who despite (or because of!) a desultory, dispiriting wreck of a campaign managed to win the popular vote and lose the presidency to a man who accused him of—you guessed it--waging class warfare.

Lost in America

"Let me tell you about the very rich," Fitzgerald once wrote, in a short story called "The Rich Boy," written in Capri in 1926 while awaiting the publication of his novel, *The Great Gatsby*. "They are different from you and me."

"Right," quipped Hemingway, "they have more money than us."

It is unfortunate—and instructive-- that Hemingway's jokey comment (as evasive as it is witty) has kept many from thinking further about class differences in America, a topic that was never far from Fitzgerald's mind, or his literary imagination. As if that were the end of the story.

It isn't.

Here is the way the story begins:

"Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing. This is because we are all queer fish, queerer behind our faces and voices than we want any one to know or than we think ourselves. When I hear a man proclaiming himself an "average, honest, open fellow," I feel pretty sure that he has some

definite and perhaps terrible abnormality which he has agreed to conceal—and his protestation of being average and honest and open is his way of reminding himself of his misprision.

"There are no types, no plurals. There is a rich boy, and this is his and not his brothers' story. All my life I have lived among his brothers but this one has been my friend. Besides, if I wrote about brothers I should have to begin by attacking all the lies that the poor have told about the rich and the rich have told about themselves—such a wild structure they have erected that when we pick up a book about the rich, some instinct prepares us for unreality. Even the intelligent and impassioned reporters of life have made the country of the rich as unreal as fairy-land."

Two things stand out in this remarkable passage: 1) the narrator's suspicion of generalizations, his marked preference for particularity (*this* rich boy's life, not his brothers, the singular not the plural, the individual not the type) as the royal road to universality; and 2) the sense that we are entering foreign terrain where things are not as they appear, where lies and liars abound, a land great with the possibility of self deception and illusion.

A land, in other words, like Long Island, where Fitzgerald lived for a time, and selected as the setting of *The Great Gatsby*.

And then, amazingly, the narrator takes us right back to type. The next two sentences are among the most misquoted in American letters, but it is the end of the paragraph that continues to astonish me:

"Let me tell you about the rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are. They are different. The only way I can describe young Anson Hunter is to approach him as if he were a foreigner and cling

stubbornly to my point of view. If I accept his for a moment I am lost—I have nothing to show but a preposterous movie."

It is difficult to keep a consistent point of view when discussing social class in America.

Things blur, go in and out of focus, because the subject of investigation and the subject doing the investigating are both highly mobile. It is like trying to hit a moving target from a truck moving through a tunnel at warp speed while sitting on a rocker that is itself atop a rotating wheel. Fitzgerald's narrator clings stubbornly to his point of view—keeps his eye on Anson, his friend, not "the rich" but this particular boy—even while acknowledging that he is one step from being lost.

Lost in America.

And if the rich are impossible to type while telling the truth, so are "the poor," a term I have grown to despise. Who are the poor, and who cares to know? And what is the poverty in me? I ask myself.

Gatsby

Scott Fitzgerald lived for a time in the 1920s at 6 Gateway Drive in Great Neck, Long Island, not far from Queens. He lived in a modest house, not unlike that of Nick Carroway, the narrator of his greatest novel. When Fitzgerald published *Gatsby* in 1925, his fable of America and the American Dream, he gave us one of the most enduring descriptions of place in the history of American letters—and with it, a map of social class in America. Here is how Nick described where he lived:

"It was a matter of chance that I should have rented a house in one of the strangest communities in North America. It was on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York -- and where there are, among other natural curiosities, two unusual formations of land. Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals -- like egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end -- but their physical resemblance

must be a source of perpetual wonder to the gulls that fly overhead. To the windless a more interesting phenomenon is their dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size. "

I first read *The Great Gatsby* in high school and immediately felt less alone. Here was a writer who understood the geography of desire and the slippage of time. Fitzgerald's best writing is a lyrical meditation on time, space, and women. Like Fitzgerald himself, during the First World War, Jay Gatsby falls helplessly in love with the "right" woman at the wrong time. Daisy Fay marries the wealthy Tom Buchanan, and Gatsby manages to convince himself that he lost her only because he was poor. He makes a fortune through mysterious means, buys a house in "West Egg," across Long Island Sound from Daisy's house in "East Egg," where he gives a series of lavish parties, intending to attract Daisy, in the hope of winning her back. The plan fails—Daisy is put off by the crassness of the western *nouveau riches*, and Gatsby is crushed but undeterred. He arranges to meet Daisy through her cousin Nick Carroway. Touched by Gatsby's devotion, Daisy agrees to leave her abusive and adulterous husband. One hot summer day there is a confrontation at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Revealing the illegal source of Gatsby's wealth, Tom breaks Daisy's resolve. On the drive back to Long Island, driving Gatsby's car, Daisy kills Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, in a hit and run accident. Gatsby assumes the blame for the fatal accident, and Tom directs Myrtle's revenge-minded husband to Gatsby's house, where Gatsby is shot in his pool. He dies alone, bereft of his illusions.

As Matthew J. Bruccoli remarks, from the first words of the novel ("In my younger and more vulnerable years") to the last ("borne back ceaselessly into the past" there are at least 450 time words in *Gatsby*. In one arresting image, the Buchanan's lawn is described as "jumping over sun-dials." The novel was mapped out in my heart in such a way that East Egg and West Egg—Fitzgerald's fictional towns, separated by "the great wet barnyard" of Long Island Sound—seemed more real to me than anyplace on earth that I had ever been. Surely I had been there before. Certainly I would return,

year after year, to check in on Daisy, and Nick, and poor Gatsby, but especially to see about Jordan Baker, a slender, small-breasted girl whose trim athlete's body and gray sun-strained eyes seemed to call to me. She was dishonest but lovely. I could relate to that. I wanted a different future for her. I hoped for her and took her part against Nick, whose reticence toward her I could not understand at sixteen. I had yet to learn to keep my distance. Like her cousin Daisy, Jordan was from Louisville, Kentucky, a place I could no more imagine than Gatsby's North Dakota. As an easterner the west (or the south) was not someplace I thought much about. The farthest west I had ever been was in my father's car at the eastern border of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, on Sunday drives after church. Even Tom Buchanan's Chicago was foreign country to me. No wonder I resisted my English teacher's simplistic *Gatsby* formulations: West = outsiders, new money, East = cultural elite, old money. I was moneyless and from the east, slipped between the lines of the formula.

Nuke the Hamptons

If New York City is the international home of money—the capitol of capital and capitalism--then the Hamptons are where the money goes for the summer.

With much money comes much stupidity.

If Fitzgerald were still alive and writing *Gatsby*, he might be tempted to set it farther east on Long Island in the Hamptons.

The Hamptons is the collective name for a cluster of *tres chic* resorts at the eastern end of Suffolk County on Long Island. These picturesque towns and villages—East Hampton, Sag Harbor, Southampton, Bridgehampton-- play host to America's cultural and business elite: the richest, most successful, most powerful - and consequently most obnoxious and loathsome - people in the country, who move there to spend their time unwinding on the beach and annoying local residents (West and East Egg redux?). Real estate prices in the Hamptons are obscene; a beachfront property costs about the same as the gross national product of a third world nation.

Some years ago I was delighted to discover a website called Nuke the Hamptons. The operative assumption is that anyone who says they are "going to the Hamptons" for the summer deserves to be nuked. Nukethehamptons.com is a site that allows you to pinpoint a target in the area - Main Street in Sag Harbor, say, with its twee gift shops, or East Hampton, the home of self-appointed U.S. Style Maven, Martha Stewart - and launch a small nuclear device that will wipe it from the face of the earth.

The site has addressed a deep-seated desire among non-Hamptons residents. "I felt extremely giddy and gleeful as I watched East Hampton burst into flames," confessed one attacker. Another said he delivers, "A few megatons to some targets at least every other day." According to site data, by midnight on June 10 members of the public had dropped more than 25,000 megatons of nuclear warheads on the area, reducing some very expensive real estate to smoldering ruins.

What has so angered the locals?

In an article some years ago in the *East Hampton Star,* Sheridan Sansegundo made the case for preemptive strikes on Bridgehampton rather than Baghdad:

"It is 90 degrees outside and you have driven from Southampton to East Hampton trapped behind a flatbed carrying a giant California redwood," writes Sansegundo.

"On Newtown Lane your car is nearly rammed by a guy on a cell phone whose Mercedes convertible suddenly makes an unsignaled U-turn.

"There are no parking spaces at the Post Office, there are 10 people in the checkout line at the supermarket, and the cinema has been taken over for an HBO movie premiere.

"It might ease the pain to know that now you can go home and vent your frustration at nukethehamptons.com."

The elaborate web site—which is the creation of Miles Jaffe, a Bridgehampton artist—opens with a NORAD lookalike control panel featuring maps of targeted villages and a list of their crimes; from there you are led step by escalating step to a nuclear launch. You

got a problem with Nick & Tony's--er, "Slick & Phony's" restaurant, the oh so trendy eatery in East Hampton? No problem. You imput authority code, coordinates, disengage the safety lock, arm your warheads, initiate a launch sequence, and *swooosh*—in real time a missile is on its way to the rescue.

"Thank you for nuking East Hampton. Please support the arts by visiting the gift shop."

Nuking the Hamptons can be stressful. As any visitor to the Hamptons knows, the best cure for stress is shopping. So after you've had the satisfaction of wiping out Southampton Town Hall - "home to officials who regularly violate their own self-imposed code of ethics in their zeal to support further frantic redevelopment in which they are heavily invested" - you might want to visit the Gift Shop and buy a bottle of "Nuclear Summer Hamptons Hot Sauce - Too Much Is Not Enough."

When you click on the Gift Shop all that remains is a giant crater and the coded message: "The damage you have wrought is nothing compared to the utter destruction that wealth has wrought."

Miles Jaffe is an angry man. "If the Hamptons are an example of the height of American culture and of the social values that are widely aspired to, then we are in deep trouble," he says.

It took Jaffe about six months to construct the site. At its zenith it was getting 1,700 hits a day.

"It's a meme," Jaffe says. "An idea that passes through the culture like a virus."

Mr. Jaffe comes by his anger honestly. His father, Norman Jaffe, was an architect in the Hamptons. "So I know all about the futility of trying to satisfy the fantasies of the *nouveux riches."*

"We are in deep trouble. That's what Nuke the Hamptons is about," Jaffe says. "When I came here [30 years ago] this was a rural community, we balanced tourism and agriculture and sustainable lifestyle ... Now there is no balance, lifestyle is king. People have to have a 12,000-square-foot house and a fleet of exotic cars."

Jaffe also headed up a local group that campaigned to ban the Hampton Jitney from using back roads. (The Jitney—also featured on

Sex and the City when Carrie and the girls hit the beaches for the weekend—is the daily "shuttle" bus from New York to the Hamptons filled with pale New Yorkers on cell phones.) That campaign resulted in the banning of commercial traffic on many residential streets in Southampton, Bridehampton, and Water Mill.

Nuclear devastation, of course, is no joking matter. But still.

Bernie Madoff owns a beach house in the township of East Hampton. It is currently on the market for $8.75. It is hoped that the proceeds of the sale will eventually go to victims of Bernie's Ponzi scheme, which defrauded investors out of billions of dollars, including Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. Do you begin to see what I am talking about?

I spent an hour or so today on the web site targeting Sag Harbor, home of Martha Stewart and her gracious living. Here is nukethehamptons.com description of Martha:

Martha Stewart built an empire creating a behavioral guide for insecure social climbers who desperately seek to achieve the look of the class they aspire to belong to. Caution: [Martha Stewart]… will subject you to countless suggestions for better living through copious consumption of such vital necessities as Martha Stewart's Maple Leaf Pancake molds.

It's not so much that I had it in for Martha—I like the way she cooks, even if she did have that little episode a while back where she—ahem—cooked the books--but I was upset with the local Sag Harbor "traffic control" practices. Driving into town for dinner from Montauk one night with S, I saw to my amazement an open parking space! Amazingly, it was right in front of the American Hotel, where we had dinner reservations. I put on my turn signal, waited patiently for the traffic to clear, and pulled into the spot. Within seconds I was greeted by a cheerful young man in a khaki uniform (there were three other young men outfitted just like him in the half block by the hotel. I was cited for crossing a double line. "Don't worry," the tasteful uniform said, "it's not a moving violation, it's just a parking violation." "Whatever," I said, and threw the ticket on the seat of the

car. When I read the fine print the next day I saw that my parking violation had cost me a cool fifty dollars.

Thinking about it further, what I don't like about the black humor of nukethehamptons.com (which is funny enough, in a banal way) is its sense of keeping the Hamptons "ours"-----when they are not "ours," and never were.

Original Sin

Seventh grade students in New York study New York state history. I was one of them, in 1967, at Lakeland Middle School. We learned about the Dutch, the English, Henry Hudson, wampum, the Algonquins, and the Mohawks. Nothing was said about Montauk or the nation that thrived there, in their ancestral land.

Nothing was said about original sin.

Long Island was formed over 100 million years ago shaped by the debris of the last Ice Age. The resulting pile left on the South Fork of Suffolk County is known as the Ronkonkoma Moraine, which is submerged beyond Montauk Point, at the easternmost tip of Long Island, but surfaces again to form Block Island, Martha's Vineyard, and the island of Nantucket.

Over 3,000 years before any white man set foot on North America, Montauk was inhabited by a native Americans. The tribe principally associated with this area called their land Montauket, meaning "Hilly Country." Although the Montauk tribe was relatively isolated at the eastern tip of the island, it grew to prominence based on the importance of wampum—polished sea shells, particularly clam shells—which were in great demand as the chief source of barter among the tribes of the region. By the time the first British settlers arrived in New England, Montauk's abundance of shells had made it a natural target of tribal envy, a factor that led to the eventual collaboration of the Montauks with the British.

At the time of the Mayflower landing in Massachusetts—1620—the Montauks were led by the greatest *sachem* (leader) in their history, Wyandanch. There was almost constant war among the tribes of New England, and the Mantauks were no match for the larger, more aggressive tribes of Connecticut

and Rhode Island. The Pequots of Rhode Island preyed on the Montauks at will, slipping across the Sound in their silent war canoes. Isolated from any neighboring tribes who might have offered help, the Montauks were forced to pay increasingly larger and larger tribute to the Pequot in wampum. With no other alternative in sight, Wyandanch in 1637 formed the first alliance between his people and the white settlers of the Connecticut colony. Captain Lian Gardiner, a 38 year old soldier, engineer and adventurer, commanded the British to whom Wyandanch pledged loyalty. (Lord Gardiner and his descendants, the "lords of the manor," created a self-sufficient agrarian economy on Gardiner's Island. They grew and raised their own food, as well as what was needed for barter, and exercised total manorial control of their island from 1639 until 1788, when it was annexed to East Hampton. Today, the island is still managed by the Gardineer family, the only known English land grant to remain in the possession of the original family.) In the summer of 1637 the Montauk sealed their allegiance to the British when, supported by British troops, a Montauk war party met and destroyed the Pequot at the Battle of the Great Swamp. The Pequot's demand for tribute ended, Wyandanch transferred that tribute to Gardiner. Gardiner was invited to visit the East End. He quickly realized the potential of the virgin land for new British settlements. Gardiner and Wyandanch underwent a ritual of blood brothership, and Gardiner learned the Montauk tongue. The friendship between these two leaders remained an isolated instance of native American and British friendship, but there was a price to pay. The Montauk people became increasingly isolated from other native tribes, ever more dependent on the British.

Not, as it turns out, a good thing.

Wyandanch and Gardiner transacted the first large land sale on the East End, which resulted in the founding of East Hampton. For these 31,000 acres, spanning present day Southampton's borders to the western edge of Napeague, the British colonists gave 20 coats, 24 hatchets, hoes, knives, looking glasses, and 100 muxes (a form of drill used in the making of wampum). The Montauk were left with

legal rights to fish and hunt in that area, and the remainder of their original lands, stretching from the Napeague border to Montauk Point. Not long after, the New England governor sold the rights to these 31,000 acres to a group of colonists. Arriving from New England in 1648, and landing at Northwest Harbor, they named their new settlement "Maidstone"--many of them having come from Maidstone, England. Within a few years the town was renamed East Hampton. The settlement flourished, and by 1651 the settlers had finished paying their debt to the governors of Connecticut and New Haven, and received the final deed to their town. The original nine settlers include names still common in East Hampton today: Hand, Mulford, Talmadge, Barnes, Dayton, Hedges, Osborn, Edwards, and Strong.

These early settlers grew distrustful of the Montauk. In 1649 a Montauk brave was accused of the murder of an East Hampton settler. Even the discovery that the murder was the act of a renegade Pequot did nothing to ease the tension. Rumors of an incipient "Indian uprising" were always afoot, including the rumor that the Dutch were secretly arming the Indians for a massive uprising—patently false. In fact, the Montauk population was rapidly declining. Constant warring with the Narragansetts inflicted serious losses on the tribe. In 1653 the Naragansetts ambushed the Montauk in what became known as "Massacre Valley," at the foot of what is now Montauk Manor. Wyandanch's own daughter—Heather Flower--was kidnapped on her wedding day and had to be ransomed from the Narragansetts with the assistance of Gardiner. Wyandanch rewarded Gardiner with a large tract of land in what now constitutes the greater part of Smithtown. In the late 1650s a series of smallpox epidemics killed two thirds of the remaining tribe.

Wyandanch died in 1659, leaving his 19 year old son in joint guardianship to his widow and Gardiner. The few surviving Montauk moved to East Hampton village, to be near Gardiner and the Rev. Thomas James, the first pastor in East Hampton. The following year the Montauk sold the last of their land to a group of East Hampton settlers, a total of 9,000 acres, stretching from Napeague to

Montauk Point. The price of the purchase was 900 pounds. With this sale, the Montauk had relinquished all claims to their ancestral lands.

Over the course of just 23 years the Montauk had sold, bartered, or given in tribute nearly 60,000 acres of Eastern Long Island to the English settlers. Unlike their Shinnecock neighbors, who kept 300 acres as a reservation, the Montauk did not retain a single acre of their land. In effect, they had ceased to exist as a tribe. From this time on they were treated as guests in their own land. In 1909 New York State Judge Al Blackmar declared the Montauk Indians to be no longer recognized as a tribe. With this decision, the Montauk lost their status as a tribe and all legal rights to their ancestral homeland.

They no longer exist as a people.

They have largely been forgotten. In this way, they have been extinguished a second time.

September 11, 2009

It is hard not to believe that America is lost. We are adrift and in debt, our economy propped up by Chinese currency, perpetually at war, with a broken economy, fifty million people without health insurance, and apparently ungovernable. I write these words on September 11, 2009. A few nights ago a U.S. congressman heckled the president of the United States, after a summer of similar behavior at health care “town hall meetings” across the land. What is it about late summer that causes people to lose their minds?

We are a nation at war, but few pause to think about it for even a moment. We are busy consuming, consuming, but anxious that we may not have enough to consume enough. We go on evading genuine thought. As Heidegger put it, "The most thought provoking thought in this thought-provoking age is that we are still not thinking." He also says in another place, only a god can save us.

Surely not the American god. I remember the billboard there in *Gatsby*, at the valley of ashes, at the intersection of the haves and the have-nots, the spectator god looking down on it all, the sad sorry

spectacle of America, what it is, what it had become, and what it was headed for.

One semester at Wittenberg University—in September 2001, in fact--I taught an 8:00 A.M. class. I mention this because it concerns hope in a dark time, a subject which is of some interest to me. And because it concerns my students. On the morning in question, the room was dark, and the windows open. It was chilly, and I shivered as I laid my umbrella on the lectern. Outside, rain was falling straight down, as heavy as I have ever seen it. One young woman sitting in the front row was drenched completely. She had no umbrella. Her long hair was dripping onto her desk, and the bottoms of her blue jeans were dark and soaked. Her bare arms were pale and smooth, glistening with water. She had two pieces of wheat bread in her hands. Her breakfast had been interrupted. She was, just before I looked away, reaching for her notebook, ready for class to start. She was on time. She looked ready.

To teach is to hope, just as to pray is to change. I teach and I pray for change. I teach and I discover that it is me who is changing. I believe—as much as I believe in anything—in the young. My teaching is itself a kind of prayer. To teach is to believe and to invest in the future, and the future is the undiscovered country, where hope lives, if it lives at all.

The Women of Lockerbie

Listening to the radio one day, I heard about a play written by Deborah Baley Brevoort, called *The Women of Lockerbie*. One day in December the sky exploded and the remains of Pan Am Flight 103 fell upon Lockerbie, Scotland. Among the many horrors one stood out for its seeming insignificance: what to do about the 11,000 articles of clothing belonging to the victims? The clothing, of course, was filthy and stained with jet fuel, clothing that carried the stench of death; the authorities called the clothes "contaminated" and decided that it must be incinerated. But the women of Lockerbie prevailed upon the U.S. government to release the clothing to them. Over one year's time, 11,000 items of clothing were washed in streams before being packed and shipped back to the families.

When asked why they had done this, one Lockerbie woman explained that every act of evil must be turned into an act of love.

Until recently I didn't know anything about this clothing or the women of Lockerbie who washed it, but right now I am wondering what their thoughts are this week, and, more importantly, what they are doing. It seems urgent to me to find out.