New Book Argues Jay Gatsby was a Black Man

Jay Gatsby Was A Black Man Passing for White? This is what Dr. Thompson is proposing in his new book, The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination.


About F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic, Dr. Thompson writes, "Essentially, beyond its class and ethnic stratifications, The Great Gatsby raises critical questions about racial identity. Thus, my argument here is that, although Jay Gatsby advances himself in terms of socioeconomic subjectivity, he is more significantly characterized as a dangerous "pale" individual, culturally, socially, and legally designated as black, who attempts to pass himself off as a sophisticated and very wealthy white individual. Accordingly, in this inquiry, The Great Gatsby represents a timeless narrative of racial passing."

The arguments raised in The Tragic Black Buck turn American literary classics upside down and inside out, highlighting nuances and exposing hidden meanings of black individuals "passing" for white in literary contexts. Beyond analyzing F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, this book also examines Charles Waddell Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, William Faulkner's Light in August, and James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man. Through mounting evidence, Dr. Thompson asserts that black individuals successfully assuming a white identity represent a paradox, in that passing for white exemplifies a challenge to the philosophy of biological white supremacy, while denying blackness.

Racial passing is a phenomenon that continues to evolve within our society. Questions about what constitutes "blackness" and "whiteness" dominant pop culture while movies like Nicole Kidman's and Anthony Hopkins', The Human Stain, demonstrate America's continued interest in the historical roots of passing. In writing about this topic, Dr. Thompson opens the door to new ways at looking at what defines race.

The Tragic Black Buck will spark debate, challenge ideals, and change the way people view race, all the while fostering renewed interest in classic American literature.

"Carlyle Van Thompson's study of black maleness as forms of mask and masquerade is brilliantly driving and fresh in its exploration of novels we thought we knew well. Boldest of all is Professor Thompson's discernment of the "black buck" standing behind the flashy white exteriors of Jay Gatsby; but every chapter here has its audacious new findings. The Tragic Black Buck will change the way we read canonical American literature as well as the current American scene, where masking and double-masking seem to define so much in our national identities. This book is a triumph." - Robert G. O'Meally, Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University

"The Tragic Black Buck is a worthy successor to the sort of imaginative literary reconstruction initiated in Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark. Professor Thompson shows us in lucid fashion how white and black identities are never the sole possession of black and white people. Blackness and whiteness are created out of the complex and intricate interplay between cultural, racial, and social forces that are larger than a fastidiously bi-polar paradigm suggests."
Michael Eric Dyson, Avalon Foundation Professor of Humanities and African-American Studies, the University of Pennsylvania

About the Author
Carlyle Van Thompson is Associate Professor of African American and American Literature at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York. He received his Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. Dr. Thompson is also the editor of the "African American Literature and Culture Expanding and Exploding the Boundaries" series published by Peter Lang.

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