

Gatsby's Guide to Manhood

Towards the end of *The Great Gatsby* Nick reveals that the young, idealistic, and disciplined Jay Gatsby wrote some “General Resolves” inside his copy of Clarence Mulford’s 1910 novel *Hopalong Cassidy*. The second in what would be a series of novels, Bill “Hopalong” Cassidy provided an adventurous role model to young boys. In the thirties, these novels would be made into popular films. It is not surprising therefore, that young Gatsby would have been fascinated with this heroic cowboy.

Fitzgerald continues to reference Western heroes by naming Gatsby’s benefactor “Dan Cody,” an allusion to Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill Cody. In the late 18th century, Daniel Boone, an American pioneer, created routes for westward expansion to what is now Kentucky and Missouri. Narratives of these exploits were published in magazines, inspiring young people with accounts of courage. Buffalo Bill Cody began his career with a series of wild-west experiences, working for Custer, shooting buffalo, and acting as a scout for the U.S. Army. In 1872, Cody received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service. Later, a penchant for showmanship led to the “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” a theatrical version of Western adventures. This show would run for thirty years.

The young Gatsby created rules for his behavior as well as a regimented schedule. This routine included exercising, studying electricity, working, playing

sports, practicing “elocution and poise,” and concluding each day with a two-hour study of inventions. In the ’20s, the practice of creating a routine and following certain “resolves” was encouraged by the YMCA, the United States Public Health Service, and other organizations intent on shaping young people into model citizens. The United States Public Health Service released a series of posters to assist young boys and girls in developing a healthy lifestyle. While these posters advocated a daily regimen of exercise, they also instructed young people on eating habits, sexual practices, and moral behavior. For example, one poster provides a sample reading list to properly guide the young male mind. Similar posters assisted young girls about how to keep a good home, stay fit, and build a family.

The Great Gatsby’s cast includes only adult characters that would have been raised in an environment filled with guidelines for proper behavior and cowboy legends. Perhaps Gatsby himself never matures, endlessly enchanted by his dreams, relentless in his attempts – guided by “general resolves” – to become the mythic American figure like Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill, or, in the novel, Dan Cody. This may be only one way that the novel becomes a satire, critiquing of implausible dreams and childish whims embraced by the Roaring Twenties generation in America.