

**PERFORMING “THE SENSIBLE THING”:
SUCCESS, CARE, AND THE LIMITS OF OPTIMIZATION IN F. SCOTTFITZGERALD’S
PSYCHOLOGICAL POETIC DRAMA**

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Abstract

This article rereads F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Sensible Thing” (1924) as a cultural and psychological drama that anticipates the logic of modern self-branding and the emotional economies of late capitalism. Rather than a nostalgic vignette of lost youth, the story emerges as a sustained exploration of success as performance, affective labor, and moral restraint. Through George O’Kelly’s cultivated “atmosphere of success” and Jonquil Cary’s careful choreography of care and refusal, Fitzgerald stages the tension between hustle culture and the ethical limits of emotional optimization. The essay further argues that editorial re-casting—most notably the renaming of George Rollins to George O’Kelly—functions as a paratextual intervention that reshapes class signaling and readerly sympathy, revealing how even minor textual decisions participate in cultural re-signification. Drawing on performance theory (Goffman; Hochschild), paratextual and textual-critical approaches (Genette; McGann), and feminist ethics of care (Tronto), the article situates “The Sensible Thing” as an early critique of optimization logics, insisting that certain human values—love, timing, and moral awareness—resist repetition, scaling, and managerial control. In this way, Fitzgerald’s story operates as an ethical mirror of modernity, translating the mythology of success into theater while restoring the dignity of limit.

Keywords: cultural analysis; social change; performance studies; F. Scott Fitzgerald; emotional labor; editorial onomastics; self-branding; affective ethics; hustle culture; modernism.

Introduction — Success as Atmosphere, Love as Non-Repeatable, and the Theater of Return

When F. Scott Fitzgerald published “The Sensible Thing” in *Liberty* (July 1924), he stood between early celebrity and canonical status—famous for *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), not yet the author of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The decade itself functioned as a pedagogy of poise. Popular manuals of self-improvement, salesmanship, and etiquette—most notably those by Orison Swett Marden—promised that discipline, self-control, and cultivated demeanor could compensate for the absence of inherited status or social pedigree (Marden 1916; Marden 1923; Marden 1925). By the mid-1920s, this emphasis on performance, confidence, and persuasive self-presentation was further institutionalized through Dale Carnegie’s early public-speaking courses, which framed personality and communicative skill as central tools for professional and social advancement (Carnegie 1926). Fitzgerald distills that confidence into a single line that doubles as method: “success is a matter of atmosphere” (Fitzgerald 1963, 60). Atmosphere here is not a metaphor; it is the story’s working medium—the social “air” produced by tempo, posture, and talk. The

opening sentence makes the claim visible: George O'Kelly "straightened his desk deliberately and with an assumed air of interest," welding the inward verb *assumed* to the outward noun *air* (60). From the first clause, the text teaches us to read *how* things are done at least as much as *what* is done.

Fitzgerald then hands us a quick primer in the techniques by which atmosphere is made. First, tempo becomes brand: George "set his teeth and began to run ... a tireless, anxious run," until it hardens into habit—"his usual run ... almost second nature" (60). Breath, stride, and verb-stacking ("began ... rushed ... began again") convert motion into meaning, a visible index of purpose in a culture learning to equate speed with virtue. Second, exit becomes theater. When Mr. Chambers fires him—"You don't have to come back ... So don't!"—George reframes dismissal as dignity: "I want to thank you ... You owe me three days' salary but you can keep it!" (62). A materially irrational act (renouncing money he needs) purchases symbolic capital (a tableau of poise that "travels" as story). Finally, speech supplies the finish. At dinner with Jonquil's family he provides the room with what it is primed to receive—"Everything's going fine ... I've been promoted—better salary"—and the narration registers the cost: "He was miserable as he said this—but they were all so glad" (64). The commodity in circulation is not information but mood; the line "works" because it stabilizes the table.

Read through Erving Goffman, this is front-stage life in high relief: the "expressive equipment" that secures an impression of competence (1959, 15–30, 208–12). George's "thank-you for firing me" is classic face-work; it patches a threatened self by offering a controllable scene (handshake, thanks, renunciation). Through Arlie Hochschild, the same moments are *affective labor*—work that produces feeling in others and manages feeling in the actor (1983, 7–9, 90–97, 186–90). The story's economy is stark: atmosphere persuades the audience, but the performer exits depleted. Fitzgerald lets us see both ledgers at once—the public glow and the private residue.

The love plot tightens the double bookkeeping. By the time George reaches the station, the grammar of performance has attached itself to intimacy: the reunion is poised for a private close-up, but Jonquil re-audiences the moment—redirecting it into public propriety by acknowledging nearby observers (63). In the car, twilight seems to promise cover, yet an attempted embrace is edited down to hand-holding, a juridical and tender corridor of touch that admits care while caps escalation (63). Indoors, she substitutes restoration for spectacle—a seated posture, low voice, and stillness that steady his turbulence until familiar talk restores order (65–66). The ethic is consistent: where George seeks conversion (performance → recognition → intimacy), Jonquil curates survivable scenes. She edits the evening away from revival and toward harmless closure (63, 65–66).

Crucially, Fitzgerald lets the narrative refuse without punishment. After the brief rupture, Jonquil returns composed, her surface neat and social, and proposes a holding pattern until George's train (Fitzgerald 1963, 68, 70). For about an hour they move through quieter streets, and the scene settles into a calm corridor of motion where a shared handhold and the afternoon light help steady him (68). The taxi functions as a mobile frame: the bench seat, the diagonal line between them, and the driver's discreet presence keep the expressive order intact. Again, in Goffman's terms, the design enables face-work—dignity preserved without public collapse; in accordance with Hochschild's, it is affective labor—composure produced and panic cooled by a partner's tuned acts; and in Tronto's, it is care judgment—knowing when to stop, not only how to continue (Goffman 1959, 22; Hochschild 1983, 90–97; Tronto 1993, 105–26, 140–42). The effect is precise: rather than

dramatizing victory or blame, the narrative stabilizes the scene so that the evening can move toward a closure that harms no one.

If George “performs success,” he also tries to perform love as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI). The story gives us his interior slogan—“There was no triumph, after all, without a girl concerned, and if he did not lay his spoils at her feet he could at least hold them for a passing moment before her eyes” (70)—and the rhetoric betrays the metric: “spoils,” “triumph,” the gaze as validation interface. The later boast that “everything would be plain sailing ... in the future” (73) is forecasting jargon, a promise that volatility has been tamed. Fitzgerald cancels it in the very next paragraph with an audit that refuses conversion: “He had traded his first youth for strength ... But with his youth, life had carried away the freshness of his love” (73). Two currencies of value coexist; no exchange rate converts achievement into freshness. The coda makes the policy explicit: “There are all kinds of love in the world, but never the same love twice” (75). Against dashboards and “plain sailing,” the story posits a non-repeatability clause.

The essay therefore treats “The Sensible Thing” as both performance text and editorial artifact. On the page, the choreography is precise; off the page, small paratextual choices shape reception. One such choice—the protagonist’s name as it travels across publication witnesses—will matter for how readers hear class and belonging; the details are deferred to the section “Editorial Re-Branding: Rollins → O’Kelly.” For now it is enough to note that paratexts function as thresholds of interpretation (Genette 1997, 1–2) and that variation across witnesses is part of a work’s meaning, not noise (McGann 1991, 13–24).

Placing the tale in its Fitzgeraldian constellation strengthens the claim. “Winter Dreams” (1922) builds the form: Dexter Green wagers that achievement can buy back a first spell, and the text refuses him. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) radicalizes the wager into catastrophe, with “Gatz → Gatsby” the most famous onomastic self-rebrand in American fiction. “The Sensible Thing” supplies the logic that explains both: “never the same love twice” (Fitzgerald 1963, 75). Read comparatively, the short stories are not the novels’ runoff but laboratories where the grammar of performance and the ontology of non-repeatable value are first drafted (Adams 2018, 1–29; Prigozy 2002). Fitzgerald’s own letters oscillate between belittling story work and insisting that each carries “one little drop of something ... me more intimately” (Fitzgerald 1945, 89–90; 1994). Recent scholarship follows the second Fitzgerald; this essay does, too.

Culturally, the story participates in the early-twentieth-century discourse of efficiency that Thorstein Veblen anatomized—display, velocity, the fetish of productivity (Veblen [1899] 2007). But its answer is ethical, not merely satiric. Where a brand culture (Banet-Weiser 2012) invites us to turn selves into coherent products, Fitzgerald scripts a counter-practice in Jonquil’s rehearsed refusals. Her “hand-for-arm,” “sofa-for-clinch,” and “gate-pause” are not coy evasions; they are a dramaturgy of limits that honors tenderness without exploiting it. In this sense, the story is not only about a particular couple; it is a small social lesson in how to end well. The “sensible thing” turns out to be a way of keeping dignity when optimization would destroy it.

Methodologically, then, the pages ahead do two things. First, they remain close to the text’s staging, quoting key beats (desk/tempo; firing/thanks; dinner/promotion; station/hand; taxi/holding; garden/pause) and reading them with a “light” theoretical lens—Goffman for front/face; Hochschild for labor; Tronto for care; Keats for “negative capability”—only where a scene requires naming the craft. Second, they track the story’s editorial after-life to show how onomastics (Rollins → O’Kelly) quietly re-casts the social script, aligning paratext with plot. Taken together, these moves situate “The Sensible Thing” as a psychological poetic drama

of limits—Fitzgerald's compact theater where atmosphere is manufactured, where love refuses to be a KPI, and where form itself thinks.

Performing Success: Body Tempo and the Manufacture of Atmosphere

Fitzgerald begins "The Sensible Thing" not with reflection but with a gesture that teaches the reader how to read the story: "At the Great American Lunch Hour young George O'Kelly straightened his desk deliberately and with an assumed air of interest, for success is a matter of atmosphere" (60). The cultural work of the sentence is carried by its modifiers: *deliberately*, an adverb signaling calculation and self-conscious control, and *assumed*, a participial adjective that exposes interest as staged rather than felt. Together, they convert a mundane bodily gesture into a performance of professionalism, aligning success not with substance or achievement but with the careful management of appearance and affect.

Sincerity has become a learned behavior; personality is technique. From the opening clause, success is not a possession but a performed climate—social air that must be constantly ventilated through motion, posture, and talk. Colleagues read the posture as proof. Belief precedes fact.

The next movement installs rhythm as social proof. George "set his teeth and began to run... a tireless, anxious run," until the motion hardens into habit—"his usual run... almost second nature" (60). The stacked verbs—*began, rushed, left, began again*—turn syntax itself into a stopwatch. Fitzgerald thus choreographs the Fordist decade, marked by industrial time-discipline and standardized pace, as a breathless tempo. As Thorstein Veblen observed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, modern prestige attaches itself to haste itself, elevating busyness into a social virtue ([1899] 2007, 103).

What matters, then, is not motion itself but its visibility: a calibrated exterior meant to steady the gaze of others. The run functions as a social front, an expressive surface designed to secure legibility and credibility in public space. At the same time, this bodily discipline performs affective work, manufacturing a sense of purpose through exertion rather than conviction. The street becomes a front-stage environment in which every passerby serves as a potential evaluator. The irony is that the atmosphere of purpose persuades only as long as it drains the actor who sustains it. Exhaustion is not a failure of the performance but its condition of possibility. Anxiety keeps the scene alive.

The street is a stage and every passerby a potential evaluator—a modern echo of an old conviction that the world itself is a theatre of performance. Shakespeare framed it most memorably: "*All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances*" (*As You Like It*, II.vii.139–41). The Duke's words imply that social identity is always an acted role, sustained by costume, gesture, and cue. Fitzgerald's city replays that Elizabethan axiom under industrial light: George's "run" becomes his entrance, his repetition of motion a kind of modern soliloquy without words. What for Shakespeare was the drama of time and fate becomes, for Fitzgerald, the drama of productivity—measured not in years or acts but in velocity.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moralists also adopted the metaphor. For Addison and Steele in *The Spectator* (1711), life in London's coffee-houses was "a kind of great stage," where "every man plays his part." Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* similarly turns Paris into a continuous performance of status and disguise; the boulevards, like Fitzgerald's streets, are both audience and scenery. Even the realist novel inherits this dramaturgy: Henry James's "observer" and Dickens's crowd scenes present modernity as theatre, with conduct, posture, and pace replacing mask and costume.

Fitzgerald's tempo thus participates in this longer genealogy of dramatic self-consciousness. His prose converts Fordist labor into choreography, making movement itself a moral language. To "run" well is to sustain one's act before the watching crowd; to falter is to break character. The result is a world where, as in Shakespeare's theatre, performance is survival—and where the price of authenticity is perpetual rehearsal.

Termination becomes the next test of composure. Chambers fires him; George responds with a brisk thank-you and even waives three days' salary (62). The renunciation purchases symbolic capital: the office witnesses a man who can afford magnanimity. Read through Erving Goffman, the gesture functions as an act of face-work, carefully staging a controllable scene in which loss is absorbed without disruption and interaction is brought to an orderly close (1959, 208–12). From the perspective of Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, the same moment registers differently: George's composure relieves the discomfort of others while quietly transferring the affective cost onto himself, debiting his own emotional reserves to stabilize the room (1983, 90–97).

The narrator's aside—no one had ever been thanked before—confirms that something durable has been produced: a legible brand of manhood, gracious under pressure. As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues of brand culture, modern selfhood increasingly packages temperament as a marketable asset; George's thank-you operates as a proto-viral gesture, calibrated for repetition and circulation within office lore (2012, 4–12). Fitzgerald, however, keeps a second ledger running alongside the first. Reputation is credited in public, while feeling is mortgaged in private—a reminder that the success of the performance depends on the concealment of its cost.

Between office and dinner lies a city edited for tempo: winter air "thin as paper," diagonals cut through a crowd so that the urban field seems choreographed by will (61). Henry Adams feared that mechanical speed would replace moral direction ([1907] 1999); Fitzgerald renders the fiction of power that speed bestows. In Sara Ahmed's vocabulary this is an affective economy in which emotions "stick" to bodies and spaces, circulating like currency (2004, 45–63). Breath, sweat, and quick gait become transmissible affects; George charges his surroundings as he moves. Atmosphere is social contagion.

At the Carys' table, George repeats the promotion line and everyone relaxes (64). The claim functions less as fact than as a speech-act that settles the room. Read against the opening account of "success as atmosphere," this is the domestic version: one sentence buys ease. Instead of re-staging the passage, note simply that the affective transaction replaces cash with reassurance; the family's gladness completes the exchange. In brief, managed affect stabilizes the scene (Hochschild 1983, 186–90), and a happiness cue circulates as social technology (Ahmed 2010, 36–39). What the episode adds to the earlier argument is a metric: in this house, marriageability is the return on affective investment. The irony remains gentle but exact: the performance "works" precisely because it performs care, locating success nowhere except in other people's relief.

Jonquil Cary's listening complicates the scene. She is both audience and silent editor. The narration's inclusive "they were all so glad" places her among the comforted, even as later scenes will show she has learned a different grammar of atmosphere. Judith Butler reminds us that gender is citational; recognizable comportment is repeated to stabilize legibility (1990, 179). At dinner Jonquil's receptive grace and George's assured tone are matching citations. But Fitzgerald seeds reversal: when necessity demands, it will be Jonquil who manages tempo and front more ethically than George's scripted ease.

Part of Fitzgerald's acuity lies in writing rhythm into prose. Keir Elam's semiotics of theater teaches that meaning in performance arises from movement, pace, and pause (1980, 57–63). Fitzgerald transcribes those elements directly to narrative: commas cue breath, verbs mark beats, repetition constructs tempo. The reader experiences the same shortness of breath that drives George. Form mirrors content: the story performs the culture it anatomizes.

The brand logics that Banet-Weiser describes elsewhere—value produced through visibility and affective attachment—also clarify why the opening acts feel contemporary (2012, 4). George's straightened desk, perfected run, and polished dinner line anticipate the "branded self." Each gesture is a marketing act designed to create belief in an unverified product. The title's sly duplicity—"The Sensible Thing"—carries the critique: sense and sales share a root. To be "sensible" is to be perceptible, to register on others' nerves as credible. Fitzgerald turns that etymology into method.

Nevertheless, atmosphere is volatile. Its half-life is short; it decays as soon as the audience disperses. That night, after the Carys' dinner, the narrated glow drops out and misery returns (Fitzgerald 1963, 64). The next morning the pattern resets: the prose revives the opening tempo cue—"he set his teeth and began to run again"—with the *again* marking a conscious reprise of the earlier "tireless, anxious run" (see 60; cf. 65). In other words, what repeats is not a new transformation but the same performance protocol: pace-as-proof, affect-as-cover. George can reproduce atmosphere, but he cannot transmute it into stability. Eva Illouz's account of emotional capitalism helps: modern cultures convert inner depletion into a sign of commitment—burnout masquerades as virtue (2007, 7–12). Fitzgerald sees the trap: the body that runs is the body that breaks.

Because Fitzgerald rejects caricature, George's performance is represented as sincere within a distorted system. The narrative voice balances irony with pity, practicing what Keats called "negative capability"—"being in uncertainties... without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1958, 1:193). George's sprint is both admirable discipline and nervous compulsion; the text refuses to resolve the tension too soon. That refusal prepares the reader to accept a different competence when it appears—not charisma but care.

It is exactly where the success-tempo seems most convincing that Fitzgerald installs Jonquil's counter-tempo. If the opening pages teach us to read movement as meaning, these later scenes teach us to read pauses as competence. On the platform, a private beat swivels outward into a public tableau (63): the gesture does not humiliate George so much as reassign the audience, reminding us that intimacy in public must answer to setting. In the car, the evening's cover invites a louder script, yet the scene is re-scored to the hand (63): a narrow corridor of touch that admits care while capping escalation. Indoors, the choreography shifts again—recovery rather than revival—as posture, quiet, and low speech restore equilibrium without spectacle (65–66). In Hall's proxemics, they are micro-edits of distance and angle that re-genre the encounter; Elam's semiotics of performance treats them as blocking cues that convert a "close-up" into a sustainable frame; for Goffman they function as face-work allowing George to keep dignity without forcing a triumph; for Hochschild they count as affective labor that cools panic and manufactures composure; in Tronto's terms they enact a mature care judgment—knowing when to stop, not only how to continue (Goffman 1959, 22; Hochschild 1983, 90–97; Tronto 1993, 105–26, 140–42; Hall 1966; Elam 1980). Jonquil's practice, in short, translates atmosphere into ethics: speed yields to designed stillness, and the evening is edited toward closure that harms no one.

Fitzgerald lets George codify his own calculus in a sentence that reads like an axiom (70): triumph requires a witnessing woman, and value is realized only in display. The diction of campaign and spoil—not

intimacy—supplies the vocabulary of the scene, and the deictic aim (“before her eyes”) reveals that the affective payoff is audience-dependent. Syntactically, the clause installs a condition (“no triumph ... without”) that turns love into a validation protocol rather than a mutual relation. That logic persists in the later future-tense promise that things will be “plain sailing” (73): the modal projects stability, as if forward guidance could neutralize volatility. Fitzgerald’s narrator immediately audits the claim (73), converting the vocabulary of gain into one of exchange and loss: youth traded for strength, “freshness” carried off, the ledger sliding into red. What matters is not the sentiment but the incommensurability the prose marks—competence and freshness belong to different currencies, and no conversion rate joins them. In brand terms (Banet-Weiser 2012), the strategy seeks exposition over reciprocity: the assurance that a performance will be seen, and thus booked as real. When the gaze fails to clear—when exposure does not yield embrace—the actor reaches for more inputs (tempo, posture, talk), but the metric itself mismeasures what cannot be turned into stock.

Placed in modernist company, Fitzgerald’s contribution is distinctively American. Pirandello exposes identity as mask; Eliot dramatizes paralysis behind polite routines. Fitzgerald yokes theatricality to mobility and markets. As Matthew Bruccoli notes, the American promise of self-reinvention was both Fitzgerald’s theme and his affliction (2002, 15). In miniature, “The Sensible Thing” turns that promise into a rehearsal loop: the man who can always “begin to run again” keeps proving he can begin; he never arrives. The story’s grammar—its verbs of motion, staged exits, and calibrated dinner talk—becomes a manual for the culture it inhabits.

All this prepares the reader to recognize the ethical inversion that follows. Early on, success is a performed atmosphere that can win a room while draining the self. Later, Jonquil demonstrates that care can stabilize a room by refusing the plot the room expects. Where his “promotion” talk performs husbandability, her hand creates livability. Where his sprint colonizes space, her pause cleans it. The story’s moral trajectory moves from performing success to performing care, from atmosphere as persuasion to atmosphere as protection. The closing axiom—“There are all kinds of love in the world, but never the same love twice” (75)—is not an afterthought but the policy implied by every earlier beat. It ends the fantasy of making feeling scalable. The brand can buy a mood; it cannot resurrect a first spell.

Before any theory intervenes, the quotes instruct us: “assumed air,” “tireless, anxious run,” “thank you... you can keep it,” “I’ve been promoted,” “they were all so glad.” One clause at a time, Fitzgerald sets an economy in motion—manufactured atmosphere, feeling as currency, dignity at a price. Only afterward do Goffman, Hochschild, Banet-Weiser, Tronto, and Veblen snap into place, naming what we already see: performance, affect, branding, care, conspicuous cost. His realism keeps two books—the room’s belief and the person’s burden—while the plot explores a different arithmetic, achieved not by reversal but by precise refusals that allow parting without debt.

From Rollins to O’Kelly: Paratext, Class, and the Making of a Protagonist

Fitzgerald’s second revelation in “The Sensible Thing” occurs not in plot but in paratext, in the tiny corridor between publication witnesses. When the story first appeared in *Liberty* (1924), its protagonist was called “George Rollins.” Two years later, when Fitzgerald republished it in *All the Sad Young Men* (1926), the name had changed to “George O’Kelly.” Most modern anthologies, including the Penguin *Bernice Bobs Her Hair and Other Stories* (1963) and the Penguin Centennial Edition (2023), retain O’Kelly, while some online archives revert to Rollins. The alteration looks trivial—a two-syllable substitution—but it quietly transforms

how the story performs class, ethnicity, and aspiration. Fitzgerald was a dramatist of names; he understood that a name, like a line of dialogue, calibrates sympathy before character begins to speak.

The difference between the two forms—Rollins and O'Kelly—extends beyond phonetics into historical resonance. *Rollins* sounds unmarked Anglo-Saxon, a surname that carries no friction in American English. *O'Kelly*, by contrast, is audibly Irish. It drags with it a century of labor, migration, and the uneasy climb from immigrant marginality to middle-class respectability. When George O'Kelly straightens his desk "deliberately and with an assumed air of interest" because "success is a matter of atmosphere" (Fitzgerald 1963, 60), his very name now contextualizes that air: success must be made visible because belonging is still conditional. What in the *Liberty* version could read as the universal hustle of a generic clerk now becomes an ethnic performance of credibility. The run through Times Square—"a tireless, anxious run... almost second nature" (60)—is no longer the restless motion of Everyman; it is the disciplined choreography of a man who must outrun stereotype.

Genette's account of the paratext helps explain why such minutiae matter. Paratexts, he writes, form "zones not only of transition but of transaction" between text and audience (1997, 1–2). They govern reading even before interpretation begins. The name on a title page or in a first sentence tells the audience what kind of story it is entering. Jerome McGann's *Textual Condition* extends this principle into sociology: variation is not noise but meaning, "the work's history of transmission" (1991, 13–24). Through these lenses, the **transformation of Rollins into O'Kelly** is more than editorial housekeeping; it is a social gesture that racializes and historicizes the tale of self-making. It supplies the accent of struggle.

The proof lies in small resonances. In the book text, the stenographer reports, "Mr. Chambers ... asked if O'Kelly had seemed queer lately" (63); later, a bystander exclaims, "Why, George O'Kelly and Jonquil Cary!" (68). Each full naming performs a tiny act of social exposure. The prefix "O'" marks George in public space; it injects a flicker of class consciousness into what otherwise seems a neutral farewell. Replace the word with *Rollins* and the scene flattens: the same line becomes friendly hail rather than recognition of difference. The new name thus recodes the book's auditory world. Fitzgerald's readers in 1926, accustomed to jokes about "Paddy" clerks and the aspirational Irish middle class, would have heard in O'Kelly a trace of the immigrant who must polish diction and manner to pass.

Sociologists remind us that names act as social scripts. Stanley Lieberson's *A Matter of Taste* (2000) documents how naming conventions track class aspiration, while Natasha Lushetich describes the name as a performative device that "summons the social imaginary that precedes and exceeds the subject" (2018, 134). Drawing on early-medieval evidence, Chetwood (2021) shows that acts of naming and renaming constructed and signaled individual and group identities across the life course, and that names could be transformed, added to, or replaced over time (181–183, 205). *O'Kelly*, by this logic, performs cultural memory—bringing into the text a collective past of migration and self-fashioning—whereas *Rollins*, stripped of that texture, floats free of history.

Fitzgerald understood the theatrical power of renaming better than most. His most famous hero begins life as James Gatz and rebrands himself "Jay Gatsby." The substitution is at once disguise and aspiration, and it becomes the novel's governing metaphor for American self-creation. "Gatz" is the son of a farmer; "Gatsby" is an invented signature, a logo calibrated for circulation (Fitzgerald 1925, 104). Crucially, *The Great Gatsby* does not stop at the protagonist's renaming. The novel famously catalogs the guests who attend Gatsby's

parties in a long, almost liturgical list of names—East Eggers, nouveaux riches, strangers, and social climbers—many of whom never meet Gatsby at all. The list reveals how names function as currency: to be named is to be momentarily admitted into visibility, even if no substance follows. Naming, here, is not identity but performance.

The renaming of Rollins as O’Kelly performs the same operation in miniature. Like Gatsby’s self-invention and his crowds of named-but-unknown guests, the editorial change surfaces what the story otherwise implies: that American self-making depends less on interior transformation than on the social legibility of a name. The revision supplies an accent of struggle, racializing and historicizing George’s ambition, and aligns the story with Fitzgerald’s larger insight—that the American Dream is, at heart, a naming project, an endless effort to make one’s name fit the dream one is trying to sell.

In the *Liberty* text, “George Rollins” could be anyone. The story reads as a sentimental parable of a poor but proud young man who loses a girl, finds success, and only then realizes that emotional fulfillment cannot be duplicated or retrieved once its moment has passed (75). In the 1926 version, the lesson shifts register. The phrase “thank-you for firing me” (62) now sounds like a performative of assimilation—the immigrant clerk mastering the etiquette of the Protestant office. When he announces at dinner, “Everything’s going fine... I’ve been promoted—better salary” (64), the boast doubles as middle-class bravado and as an act of ethnic translation, signaling that the son of O’Kelly can manage the idioms of decorum. Each smile, each tempo change, acquires double resonance: personal ambition and cultural audition.

This ethnically inflected reading also revises Fitzgerald’s moral economy of hustle. George’s sprint through Times Square now registers as a descendant of the Irish runner in American caricature, sweating to prove worth. The hero’s name turns the generic “American Lunch Hour” into a social threshold—a moment when the immigrant must clock in faster, work longer, thank the boss sooner. The word *O’Kelly* brings into the modernist stage what Matthew Jacobson calls “whiteness of a different color,” the period when Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants were being gradually folded into conditional whiteness (1998, 5–8). Fitzgerald’s revision does not preach this history; it lets the spelling carry it. A single apostrophe performs assimilation and difference at once.

Seen through Genette and McGann, the revision is linguistic and ontological, recasting who George is and what the story means. O’Kelly’s self-fashioning becomes an allegory of textual self-fashioning. Just as the character seeks social readability through tempo and speech, the text itself seeks cultural readability through its paratext. The author revises his manuscript the way his hero revises his persona. Fitzgerald’s art of editing mirrors his art of characterization.

The onomastic shift also prefigures a wider cultural condition that Banet-Weiser terms “the brand logic of personhood.” In modern capitalism, she writes, brands function as “affective anchors,” transforming personal style into public identity (2012, 10–12). O’Kelly, in this sense, is a brand with demographic texture; Rollins is a generic trademark. One has backstory; the other has scalability. The revision therefore anticipates the twentieth century’s conversion of ethnic difference into marketable identity. The Irish name that once signaled stigma can now index authenticity, a pattern familiar from Fitzgerald’s own self-marketing as the “spokesman of the Jazz Age.”

Small as it is, the change also clarifies Fitzgerald’s sensitivity to sound. The O’ carries an upward lilt that echoes the story’s obsession with ascent. “Rollins” falls flat, consonantal and closed; “O’Kelly” rises on

the vowel, ending on a bright syllable that invites sympathy. The rhythm of the name itself matches the story's kinetic diction—the forward thrust of “began to run,” “rushed,” “straightened.” Fitzgerald the prosodist understood that phonetics shape affect. A single prefix can make a sentence breathe differently.

When read alongside *The Great Gatsby*, the name change situates “The Sensible Thing” within Fitzgerald's sustained attention to social nomenclature. The famous guest list in *Gatsby*'s fourth chapter—less a roster than a sonic taxonomy—organizes status through sound, turning surnames into audible markers of class. What matters is not who attends but how their names register. The change from Rollins to O'Kelly imports this logic of audibility into the earlier story, translating ambition into phonetic form. Names, in Fitzgerald's world, are never neutral; they function as acoustics of hierarchy.

The editorial evidence strengthens the case. As Kirk Curnutt and Robert Trogon observe in their bibliographical commentary, the *Liberty* typescript with “Rollins” appears to have been Fitzgerald's quick sale to a magazine that favored universality, while the later *All the Sad Young Men* revision came amid his efforts to consolidate literary prestige (2023). The new name signals seriousness: O'Kelly reads literary, historically anchored, slightly tragic. Rollins reads disposable. Fitzgerald's change thus participates in the larger process by which magazine fiction was re-edited into literature, its edges thickened by specificity.

Placed within textual history, the revision invites reconsideration of the short story as form. Scholars such as Jade Adams (2018) and Matthew Bruccoli (1978) have long argued that Fitzgerald's stories were not run-off from his novels but laboratories where themes and techniques were tested. “The Sensible Thing,” with its single onomastic swap, demonstrates that editorial minutiae can carry thematic weight. The story's central argument—that identity in modern culture is a performed product, endlessly edited for visibility—repeats at the level of production. The writer who changes “Rollins” to “O'Kelly” performs the same work as the hero who straightens his desk and rehearses his smile: both are learning how to look credible.

The substitution also situates Fitzgerald in dialogue with contemporaneous Irish-American modernists—Eugene O'Neill, James T. Farrell, and John O'Hara—who were translating ethnic experience into middle-class idiom. Like them, he treats name as destiny and diction as social mobility. “O'Kelly” becomes the hinge between insider and outsider, between the parochial and the cosmopolitan. In that sense, the editorial decision extends the story's psychological drama into the page's typography: Fitzgerald enacts, through editing, the very struggle he describes through fiction.

What finally emerges from this paratextual lens is a theory of naming as narrative ethics. The difference between Rollins and O'Kelly redefines what “sensible” means. For Rollins, the sensible thing would be upward mobility achieved by willpower alone. For O'Kelly, sensibility itself is double: success requires both polish and memory, ascent and acknowledgment of origin. The apostrophe becomes a moral mark, reminding readers that self-making always carries residue.

The reader's experience bears this out. Modern students encountering the O'Kelly version often sense the ethnic texture intuitively; discussions turn to immigration, to code-switching, to how one “makes it” in an unequal system. Those reading Rollins versions, by contrast, universalize the lesson as middle-class perseverance. The paratext shapes pedagogy. A single letter modifies the cultural frame through which empathy travels.

By revealing that textual editing can encode social history, the Rollins → O'Kelly revision exemplifies McGann's contention that “the bibliographical is the ideological” (1991, 21). Fitzgerald's name change

performs the very insight his story teaches: identity is produced through acts of display, every iteration slightly different, each leaving a trace of its conditions. To read the story with this awareness is to see how modern literature rehearses modern life: success, both for person and text, is a matter of being legible to power without losing the accent of one's beginning.

Care, Refusal, and the Anti-Optimization Ethic

Fitzgerald's drama turns, in its final third, from the spectacle of success to the practice of restraint. If George O'Kelly learns to perform achievement as a sequence of gestures—tempo, posture, talk—Jonquil Cary performs the equally difficult art of withholding. Her presence re-centers the story on what Joan Tronto calls “the moral boundaries of care” (1993, 140–42). Each choice she makes—hand instead of arm, polite address instead of kiss, powder and hat instead of tears—translates feeling into discernment. Care, here, is not service or sentimentality; it is a form of self-governance that protects both giver and receiver from collapse.

The platform meeting crystallizes this ethic. The scene begins as cinematic embrace and ends as civic tableau. She lifts her arms, “her mouth half parted for his kiss,” but then “held him off suddenly and lightly” and announces, “This is Mr. Craddock and Mr. Holt” (63). With one motion she transforms private reunion into public etiquette, redirecting the play's energy from desire to decorum. In Erving Goffman's vocabulary, she “reframes” the situation, switching from a romantic to a social code (1959, 238–44). The gesture also performs gender as boundary work. Judith Butler's account of performativity clarifies how repeated acts—posture, tone, timing—sustain intelligibility; Jonquil's light refusal re-cites a script of feminine dignity that both participates in and critiques its own convention (Butler 1990, 179). Fitzgerald uses her body as syntax. Every movement edits meaning. The step back is a comma; the introduction of onlookers is a colon; the journey that follows rewrites the sentence of love into a paragraph about manners and mercy.

Extending the metaphor, the scene's punctuation palette becomes legible. On the platform, proxemic shifts supply the grammar: a half-pace of withdrawal inserts a comma—a breathable pause that slows tempo without ending relation; the naming of bystanders functions as a colon, opening a new clause of obligation in which intimacy must answer to audience; the later interior stillness supplies a provisional period, a full stop that prevents escalation while leaving the paragraph open to revision (Hall 1966; Elam 1980). In this sense blocking is rhetoric: angle, range, and cadence do the work that an explicit speech would bluntly declare. What looks like kindness is also composition; what looks like refusal is also editing for legibility. If, as Shakespeare reminds us, “all the world's a stage,” then Fitzgerald's stage directions arrive through touch and distance rather than italics: the actor's cue is a hand, a chair, a breath (Shakespeare [1599] 1997, II.vii.139–41).

Seen through performance semiotics, Jonquil's “comma” averts a melodramatic close-up; the “colon” installs a civic clause; and, later, the sofa's restorative posture acts like a semicolon, linking two related states—turbulence and composure—without collapsing one into the other (Elam 1980). Read through affect theory, these micro-edits are also emotional technologies: the pause cools arousal; the re-audiencing redistributes attention; the seated hush converts heat into care (Hochschild 1983, 90–97). And in Tronto's terms, such punctuation is judgment—an ethics of knowing when to stop as well as how to proceed (1993, 105–26). The result is that atmosphere—so easy to manufacture with pace and talk—hardens into ethics only when it submits to form. Jonquil's grammar of gestures keeps dignity intact, spares the crowd embarrassment, and steers the evening toward a conclusion that harms no one.

Inside the taxi, the ethic matures into tempo and tone. The narration reduces language to a single steady

pulse: "For an hour ... he held her hand and grew calmer in the sunshine" (68). The ellipsis stretches time, turning minutes into a restorative continuum. Hochschild's theory of emotional labor clarifies the transaction: Jonquil produces calm as a form of care work, cooling George's panic without reigniting desire (1983, 186–90). The taxi functions as an emotional quarantine, a moving corridor where feeling can circulate without contagion. Its architecture—a narrow seat, forward-facing bodies, a driver present—discourages escalation. Public enough to demand restraint, private enough to permit gentleness, it becomes the perfect chamber for what Tronto calls the "competence phase" of care, the ability to act in a way that truly meets another's need (1993, 105–26). George's need is not reunion but recovery, and Jonquil administers it with professional precision. The journey's slowness—the rare hour of stillness in a story obsessed with running—offers a temporary commons of breath.

The chrysanthemum-garden pause is the still point where Fitzgerald converts drama into philosophy. "They saw each other's eyes ... a faintly accelerated breath ... That was all" (73). The minimalism is shocking after pages of hustle. The entire theology of performance collapses into silence. John Keats's phrase "negative capability" names the virtue at work—the ability to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 1958, 1:193). Jonquil's silence is not evasion; it is mastery of contradiction. The breath admits tenderness; the turning away preserves autonomy. The moment teaches that care and renunciation are not opposites but coordinates. Fitzgerald composes the beat like a musical *ritardando*: tempo slows, tension releases, yet the harmony remains unresolved. It is a moment of human equilibrium so precise that the narration must end it quickly, letting them "go on into the second garden." To linger would break the spell.

Fitzgerald's moral geometry contrasts sharply with the expansionist ethos of his age. George's career plot resembles what later management theory would diagram as a KPI chart (Kaplan and Norton 1992; Parmenter 2015): inputs of effort should yield outputs of love, recognition, and advancement. When the data misbehave—when intimacy resists conversion—he interprets it as failure. Jonquil's ethic cancels the metric. She knows that the logic of optimization cannot govern affection. Her care corrects the calculus: some values—freshness, tenderness, dignity—cannot be measured or multiplied. In refusing to scale the moment, she rescues it. The taxi, the sofa, the garden all become instruments of what we might call moral pacing: she slows the plot to preserve truth.

The story's late imagery makes this critique visible. George returns from South America "almost black with tan," "lost part of an eyebrow," and "an elastic bandage on his knee"; even on the steamer "many women had looked at him with unusual tributary interest" (70). He has branded himself with experience. The signs of ordeal serve as credentials in a culture where suffering is marketable authenticity. Eva Illouz's theory of emotional capitalism explains the type: "feeling itself becomes an instrument of production," a resource to be displayed and consumed (2007, 7–12). The suntan, the scar, the attention of women are new forms of capital. In the optimization script, these tokens should guarantee conversion—pain into depth, travel into wisdom, scars into desirability. Fitzgerald punctures the fantasy with one sentence of anti-branding clarity: "for an instant as he kissed her he knew that though he searched through eternity he could never recapture those lost April hours" (75). The line wipes out the entire logic of accumulation. No portfolio of experiences can reproduce freshness; no brand of self can restore a first relation.

Jonquil's quiet "no" in this scene is therefore not coldness but wisdom—the recognition that the value

of love lies in its unrepeatability. Her refusal completes the pedagogy that began with George's desk straightening: both acts are performances, but hers ends the cycle. The story closes not with reunion but with comprehension, and comprehension itself becomes the sensible thing. What Fitzgerald offers is not a moral against ambition but a correction of scale: greatness must learn how to end.

Jonquil's gestures also anticipate a civic and feminist ethic that would later be theorized as care's social dimension. Her restraint is not simply personal virtue; it is a public act that keeps the world breathable. By refusing melodrama, she models a behavior that sustains community rather than spectacle. In a decade dominated by advertising and display, her modesty is revolutionary. Tronto's argument that "care is both practice and disposition" (1993, 135) fits precisely: Jonquil's body, posture, and speech instantiate a politics of maintenance over mastery. When she converts what could have been a scandalous farewell into polite choreography, she protects not only herself and George but the bystanders, the social fabric that holds them. Her virtue is infrastructural.

Fitzgerald writes this restraint with palpable tenderness. The prose lingers on surfaces—powder, hat brim, hand, breath—but the focus is ethical, not erotic. He refuses to punish her calm or sentimentalize her loss. The narrative voice, usually sympathetic to male yearning, here accords dignity to the woman's measure. In this, Fitzgerald departs from the tragic scripts of "Winter Dreams" and *Gatsby*. Judy Jones's beauty decays into a moral; Daisy Buchanan's voice dissolves into money. Jonquil alone survives the page with equilibrium intact. Her victory is the ability to stop. The culture that cannot stop will soon crash.

The final paragraphs reveal that Fitzgerald's supposed romanticism is a form of moral realism. "He had traded his first youth for strength and carved success out of despair. But with his youth, life had carried away the freshness of his love" (73). The sentence is ledger-like: gain and loss set in parallel clauses, comma for comma. Freshness is not a renewable resource; its loss is structural, not tragic. The story closes by asserting the non-repeatability of love itself, converting emotional experience into ethical knowledge. Where the earlier pages measured success by atmosphere, the ending measures wisdom by limit. Jonquil's ethic of care becomes the instrument that tunes the moral key.

The social resonance of that ending extends beyond the lovers. Fitzgerald wrote in an America enthralled by the promise of infinite growth, the fantasy that life, like business, could be continuously scaled. In this context, the refusal to repeat a love becomes a parable against the repetition of desire itself as commodity. Jonquil's behavior outlines an alternative modernity—one built on repair, patience, and restraint. If George's creed is acceleration, hers is maintenance. The narrative's final tableau—two people calm, unjoined, continuing their separate journeys—offers a micro-utopia of sustainability amid exhaustion. It dramatizes what Tronto later formulates as care's highest test: knowing when to withdraw (1993, 140–42).

In ethical and aesthetic terms, then, Jonquil's part of the story completes Fitzgerald's experiment in form. The prose that once chased tempo now measures stillness; dialogue gives way to gesture; performance turns inward into discipline. Fitzgerald invents, almost accidentally, a feminine modernism grounded in moderation. The brief look, the breath shared and released, becomes the moral emblem of an art that prefers balance to conquest. To a culture addicted to display, the lesson is quietly radical: sometimes the only sensible thing is to stop performing.

Conclusion — Cultural Analysis through Form

Reading "*The Sensible Thing*" through performance, textual history, and ethics reveals how Fitzgerald

converts what seems a private romance into a commentary on modern public life. Success, he insists, is an atmosphere performed into being; love, by contrast, is an experience whose value depends on its irreversibility. The story dramatizes the social cost of confusing the two. In George O'Kelly's breathless striving—his running, smiling, thanking, boasting—Fitzgerald exposes an early form of a culture that will later call itself "hustle": identity built on motion, optimization as creed, and feeling treated as currency. Against that drift he scripts an opposing ethic embodied in Jonquil Cary's composure. Her small refusals—hand instead of arm, silence instead of declaration—redeem the century's speed with a grammar of care. The ending therefore functions as both epitaph and cure, insisting that love derives its meaning not from repetition or accumulation but from the dignity of its singular completion.

From the standpoint of cultural analysis and social change, three implications follow. First, mythic and literary memory are actionable. Fitzgerald's story retools the oldest of narrative patterns—the hero's journey—into the language of modern life. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the grief-stricken king races across the earth in pursuit of immortality, only to meet Siduri, the wise tavern keeper, who halts him with a human reminder: "Fill your belly with good things, day and night, dance and be merry... for this too is the lot of man." Her counsel transforms a heroic quest into a philosophy of limits and renewal. Fitzgerald repeats this ancient encounter in miniature. George, exhausted from his "tireless, anxious run," meets Jonquil not as a goddess but as a social equal who delivers a modern paraphrase of Siduri's advice: she tells him to sit, to rest, to let the turbulence settle. What Siduri framed as acceptance of mortality, Jonquil reframes as acceptance of finitude in love and ambition—the recognition that caring for what remains is wiser than pursuing what is lost. The journey that once sought immortality now seeks equilibrium. Heroism becomes attentiveness; care replaces conquest. In this re-timed epic, the "sensible thing" is not victory but maintenance—a civic as well as a personal virtue, the art of keeping the world intact by caring for its continuities instead of trying to master its limits.

Second, the story's transmission history—the change from "George Rollins" to "George O'Kelly," its republication in magazines, anthologies, and classrooms—demonstrates how cultural forms themselves narrate loss without despair. Each adaptation performs the tale's lesson about irrecoverability. The magazine version markets universality; the book version restores history and accent. Modern teaching editions re-stage it again, asking students to find meaning in difference rather than to reconcile variants. Across these replays, culture learns to treat change not as error but as evolution. Fitzgerald's story thus models how a community can metabolize failure into insight, the way a classroom can read the same page each year and still discover novelty in the act of rereading.

Third, form itself operates as social method. Fitzgerald's precision with *mise-en-scène*—the platform, car, sofa, and garden—translates psychological states into public ethics. Each space functions as what Goffman (1959) would call a frame for conduct: the stage on which civility is rehearsed and preserved. His use of proxemics, of physical distance and gesture, builds what Ahmed (2004) calls an "affective economy," in which emotion moves between bodies as a medium of social order. Even his editorial design—the shift in name, the tightening of punctuation, the rhythm of breath in the closing line—illustrates how textual form can act as a technology of consent, converting anxiety into comprehension. The result is a micro-sociology of feeling: literature as an instrument for teaching composure in the face of flux.

As three readers and writers (thethree lenses through which the story is interpreted) we find the story's

power in its measured refusal of triumph. One of us reads the tavern-like endings of Fitzgerald's world—the quiet reconciliations, the cups raised to what cannot return—as models of ethical moderation in an age of extremes. Another values the civic turn, the way Fitzgerald anchors emotion to community and makes care a form of citizenship. A third admires the discipline of compression that allows a brief short story to carry a philosophy of limits more convincing than entire novels of self-help. Together we see in “The Sensible Thing” not nostalgia but method: a design that teaches how endings, properly faced, become beginnings of understanding. The tale succeeds not by reproducing epic ambition but by redeploing it as an ethic for ordinary life. It offers a blueprint for cultural resilience—how art, when progress worships repetition, can re-teach the dignity of conclusion, the grace of knowing when to stop, and the wisdom to call that knowledge success.

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