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*Owl Eyes in The Great Gatsby*

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A part from his comic and thematic significance in *The Great Gatsby*, it seems likely that the unnamed minor character known only as “Owl Eyes” may have another, more personal point and a real-life prototype: for “Owl Eyes” is a nickname at one time applied to Ring Lardner.

Lardner was apparently given the nickname when he was a sports writer covering the 1919 World Series. This was the Series “fixed” by a group of New York gamblers, masterminded in reality, it was then believed, by Arnold Rothstein<sup>1</sup> and in *The Great Gatsby* by Meyer Wolfsheim. At the Series, a fellow sports writer recalls, “as Ring Lardner poked fun at Rollie Zeider’s nose, Rollie countered by calling him Owl Eyes, but those owl eyes, too, were seeing a lot of strange things.”<sup>2</sup> Those eyes and what they saw, the national pastime corrupted for money, suggest the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, of which Owl Eyes is a thematic echo, overlooking the corruption of the Valley of Ashes.

As Ring Lardner was a close friend and neighbor of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, it seems plausible that Fitzgerald created and named his owl-eyed character at least partly as an oblique and humorous tribute to his friend. If so, the tribute is a pleasant one: the gentle, genial drunk whose integrity, in attending the funeral of the man whose liquor he has freely drunk, counterpoints Nick Carraway’s, and whose capacity for wonder, at the theatrical effect of the library whose books he has “ascertained” are “absolutely real,” is second to Gatsby’s own.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick G. Lieb, *The Story of the World Series: An Informal History* (New York, 1949), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Lieb, p. 133.