Douglas Taylor was the first to explore at length Gatsby’s symbolic identification with Jesus, and other interpreters have noted it, including Robert Emmitt, who sees Gatsby as being informed by the archetype of the dying god. These and other interpreters have noticed evocations of the Passion of Christ near the conclusion of the novel. There, Gatsby evokes Jesus carrying his cross. On the last day of his life, Gatsby went from his house to its garage, picked up an inflated air mattress, and “shouldered” it (128)—not the usual way to carry an air mattress. This alone might not recall conventional depictions of Jesus carrying his cross over one shoulder, but Gatsby is about to die on this air mattress. The chauffeur is a would-be Simon of Cyrene, who, for a while, carries Jesus’s cross for him (Matt. 27.32). After his death, moreover, as the air mattress revolves slowly, Gatsby’s blood flows into the water of the swimming pool, making “a thin red circle in the water” (129). This mixture of blood and water may evoke, as Taylor suggests (37), the “blood and water” flowing from the side of Jesus after he was pierced in the side by a spear (John 19.34).

The ironically cushy, “pneumatic mattress” symbolizes the inflated, airy, or spiritual romanticism which gets Gatsby killed (128). It is what motivates him to keep Daisy’s secret about her accidentally killing Myrtle Wilson. The same romantic love keeps him awake the night before his death, during his vigil at the Buchanan house—which recalls the vigil Jesus keeps in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Whether or not Gatsby suffers agony akin to
Jesus’s, like Jesus he keeps his vigil in a garden, the back garden of the Buchanan’s house. Moreover, just as Jesus suffers alone while his disciples sleep, Gatsby is left alone by Nick Carraway, who goes home to sleep. (Carraway is, in a sense, Gatsby’s disciple and his evangelist, given that he writes his story.) Carraway “le[aves] him standing there . . . watching over nothing” (116). The word “watching” recalls Jesus in the Gethsemane enjoining his disciples, “watch with me” and observing, “you could not watch with me one hour?” (Matthew 26.38–39). With all this in mind, it seems more than mere coincidence that Jay Gatsby shares with Jesus the first initial of his first name. It is a name Gatsby gives himself “at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career” as a savior (78): he is rowing out to warn Dan Cody that he has anchored “over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior” and “that a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour” (78).

As a redeemer, Gatsby is a Jesus figure in various senses. As an idealizing romantic, he attempts to redeem his own experience of the world. For Carraway, Gatsby’s romantic dedication is, to a large extent, imaginatively redemptive of the crass materialism typifying most other characters in the novel. And Gatsby is ultimately a Jesus figure in that he dies for Daisy’s sin. Her killing Myrtle is accidental and therefore cannot be a sin, but she flees the scene of the accident, and that is a sin as well as a crime. Gatsby has intentionally taken her crime upon himself. When Carraway asks him if Daisy was driving, Gatsby replies, “Yes, . . . but of course I’ll say I was” (114).

Echoes of the New Testament late in the novel extend earlier imagery of Gatsby’s self-invention. In chapter 6, Gatsby imaginatively goes one better than Jesus as product of a virgin birth: according to Carraway, “his imagination had never really accepted” his biological parents “as his parents at all” (78). Instead, Carraway says, Jay Gatsby “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s business” (78–79). Carraway alludes here to Luke’s gospel, where, establishing himself as the son of God, Jesus declares independence from his earthly parents by telling his mother, “I must be about my Father’s business” (2.49). (Many commentators have noted this, including Taylor 35, Emmitt 284, and Christensen 15.) Jesus is referring, of course, to his heavenly Father. As Carraway uses the words, Gatsby is his own father in an imaginative recasting of theological consubstantiality, the doctrine by which the father and son are one in substance. In combination with these evocations of Jesus in chapter 6, the final allusions to the suffering and death of Jesus imply that Fitzgerald and Carraway have been narrating, with deeply ironic double meaning, the Passion of Gatsby.
Note

1With anatomical licence, Robert Emmitt notes, “He is Christ, who carries the emblem of death upon his back” (285). William Earle notes that the resemblance of the air mattress to Christ’s cross is established “by the placement of the mattress upon Gatsby’s shoulder” (3).

Works Cited
