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*Gatsby* and the Meaning of . . . Molars?

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* typically conjures images of extravagant parties, luxurious homes, lavish cars, and the reckless excesses of socialites during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. It is safe to assume, then, that most readers do not remember any special mention of human teeth in the novel. Nonetheless, a curious reference to molars occurs during a luncheon where the narrator Nick Carraway meets up with Meyer Wolfsheim and Jay Gatsby. As the three men sit at the table conversing, Nick takes note of Mr. Wolfsheim’s cuff links. Aware of Nick’s stare, Wolfsheim replies, “I see you’re looking at my cuff buttons [. . .] finest specimens of human molars,” to which Nick responds, “That’s a very interesting idea” (81). Without further commentary on this bizarre clothing accessory, the luncheon proceeds as if nothing unusual has transpired. Yet the passing mention of Wolfsheim’s uncommon cuff links—meaningless as the remark may seem at first—actually calls greater attention to their presence, and immediately begs the question as to why the novel features this strange fashion item. What underlies the text’s depiction of Meyer Wolfsheim—a Jew, an underworld power broker, and “the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919” (78)—as someone proud to wear cuff buttons made out of “the finest specimens” of human teeth? What thematic significances can be assigned to this odd piece of jewelry?