

Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Lecture 3

Discussions and explanations of the most important issues in the novel

I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool

Daisy speaks these words in Chapter 1 as she describes to Nick and Jordan her hopes for her infant daughter. While not directly relevant to the novel's main themes, this quote offers a revealing glimpse into Daisy's character. Daisy is not a fool herself but is the product of a social environment that, to a great extent, does not value intelligence in women. The older generation values subservience and docility in females, and the younger generation values thoughtless giddiness and pleasure-seeking. Daisy's remark is somewhat sardonic: while she refers to the social values of her era, she does not seem to challenge them. Instead, she describes her own boredom with life and seems to imply that a girl can have more fun if she is beautiful and simplistic. Daisy herself often tries to act such a part. She conforms to the social standard of American femininity in the 1920s in order to avoid such tension-filled issues as her undying love for Gatsby.

He had one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself.

This passage occurs in Chapter 3 as part of Nick's first close examination of Gatsby's character and appearance. This description of Gatsby's smile captures both the theatrical quality of Gatsby's character and his charisma. Additionally, it encapsulates the manner in which Gatsby appears to the outside world, an image Fitzgerald slowly deconstructs as the novel progresses toward Gatsby's death in Chapter 8. One of the main facets of Gatsby's persona is that he acts out a role that he defined for himself when he was seventeen years old. His smile seems to be both an important part of the role and a result of the singular combination of hope and imagination that enables him to play it so effectively. Here, Nick describes Gatsby's rare focus—he has the ability to make anyone he smiles at feel as though he has chosen that person out of “the whole external world,” reflecting that person's most optimistic conception of him- or herself.

The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, 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, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

In Chapter 6, when Nick finally describes Gatsby's early history, he uses this striking comparison between Gatsby and Jesus Christ to illuminate Gatsby's creation of his own identity. Fitzgerald was probably influenced in drawing this parallel by a nineteenth-century book by Ernest Renan entitled *The Life of Jesus*. This book presents Jesus as a figure who essentially decided to make himself the son of God, then brought himself to ruin by refusing to recognize the reality that denied his self-conception. Renan describes a Jesus who is “faithful

to his self-created dream but scornful of the factual truth that finally crushes him and his dream”—a very appropriate description of Gatsby. Fitzgerald is known to have admired Renan’s work and seems to have drawn upon it in devising this metaphor. Though the parallel between Gatsby and Jesus is not an important motif in *The Great Gatsby*, it is nonetheless a suggestive comparison, as Gatsby transforms himself into the ideal that he envisioned for himself (a “Platonic conception of himself”) as a youngster and remains committed to that ideal, despite the obstacles that society presents to the fulfillment of his dream

That’s my Middle West . . . the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark. . . . I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadoptable to Eastern life

This important quote from Nick’s lengthy meditation in Chapter 9 brings the motif of geography in *The Great Gatsby* to a conclusion. Throughout the novel, places are associated with themes, characters, and ideas. The East is associated with a fast-paced lifestyle, decadent parties, crumbling moral values, and the pursuit of wealth, while the West and the Midwest are associated with more traditional moral values. In this moment, Nick realizes for the first

time that though his story is set on the East Coast, the western character of his acquaintances (“some deficiency in common”) is the source of the story’s tensions and attitudes. He considers each character’s behavior and value choices as a reaction to the wealth-obsessed culture of New York. This perspective contributes powerfully to Nick’s decision to leave the East Coast and return to Minnesota, as the infeasibility of Nick’s Midwestern values in New York society mirrors the impracticality of Gatsby’s dream.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past

. These words conclude the novel and find Nick returning to the theme of the significance of the past to dreams of the future, here represented by the green light. He focuses on the struggle of human beings to achieve their goals by both transcending and re-creating the past. Yet humans prove themselves unable to move beyond the past: in the metaphoric language used here, the current draws them backward as they row forward toward the green light. This past functions as the source of their ideas about the future (epitomized by Gatsby’s desire to re-create 1917 in his affair with Daisy) and they cannot escape it as they continue to struggle to transform their dreams into reality.

While they never lose their optimism (“tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . .”), they expend all of their energy in pursuit of a goal that moves ever farther away. This apt metaphor characterizes both Gatsby’s struggle and the American dream itself. Nick’s words register neither blind approval nor cynical disillusionment but rather the respectful melancholy that he ultimately brings to his study of Gatsby’s life.