

## Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby ( F. Scott Fitzgerald)

### Lecture 13

**Displaced Spirituality in *The Great Gatsby***, Fitzgerald proudly tackles the theme of spirituality. His attack is subtle, making his message heard most forcefully by what is missing, rather than what is there. The world of *The Great Gatsby* is one of excess, folly, and pleasure, a world where people are so busy living for the moment that they have lost touch with any sort of morality, and end up breaking laws, cheating, and even killing. As debauched as this may sound, however, they have not abandoned spirituality altogether. Rather, Fitzgerald's post-war partiers have substituted materialism and instant creature comforts for philosophic principles, thus suggesting a lack of order and structure in the worlds of East Egg, West Egg, and beyond.

Several elements suggest an imbalance in the moral makeup of the characters found in *The Great Gatsby*. In Nick's opening statements, he is attempting to set himself up as an honorable and trustworthy man. His reason for doing so, however, isn't made entirely clear until readers are introduced to the people with whom he interacts. Barely halfway through the first chapter, Fitzgerald reveals that Tom Buchanan is not only having an affair, but he is shamelessly bold in his refusal to cover it up; his wife knows and although she is a bit irritated, she has come to accept Tom's ways. In addition, those in East Egg discuss things of such great importance as what to do on the longest day and why living in the East is ideal, showing that

the supposedly social elite are perhaps a bit out of touch with reality. They clearly treat people as objects, and are unconcerned with whether their actions impede on anyone else's.

After the Buchanan's dinner party, *The Great Gatsby* is again and again filled with excess. In fact, every one of the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust) is well represented. None of the characters, including Nick, are free from the deadly vices, which, at least in times past, have traditionally marked the downfall of a community. It is interesting to note that although the seven deadly sins are depicted time and time again by the people in *The Great Gatsby*, the theological counterpart to the seven deadly sins, the seven cardinal virtues (faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) are nearly invisible. Gatsby, of course, has more hope than all the others put together, but in the end, that one thing, no matter how strong, can't save him.

Although countless acts of questionable integrity can be found within the pages of *The Great Gatsby*, the final and most blatant acts of immorality, of course, come near the book's end. Daisy shows her true self when she runs down Myrtle without even stopping. Gatsby becomes the target for another man's murderous rage when he is gunned down by Wilson (assisted, through association, by Tom). And finally, the last great act of disregard for one's fellow human comes in perhaps the most surprising and disturbing form of all: the lack of mourners at Gatsby's funeral. Despite how people had clamored to be associated with him in life, in death he became useless to them, and so their interests took them elsewhere (with, of course, the sole exception of Nick).

Finally, Fitzgerald uses geography to represent his message of spiritual dysfunction, beginning with the distinct communities of East Egg and West Egg. Granted, their differences are largely

socioeconomic, but when looking at the inhabitants of each Egg, the West Eggers stand somewhat above the East Eggers (albeit not by much). Whereas no one in East Egg has any virtues to redeem themselves, West Egg does have Nick, the one character in the book who has a fairly good sense of right and wrong. Just as Fitzgerald favored one Egg over the other (despite it being perceived as the less fashionable Egg), he also pits regions of the country against each other, with similar results. There is no denying that Fitzgerald sees the Midwest as a land of promise.

He acknowledges it is less glamorous and exciting than the East, but it has a pureness about it that the East lacks. All his characters come from the Midwest, and in the end, the East does them in. As Nick says, "we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." Nick is the only one to realize this, however, and so after he has become completely disillusioned with life in the East, he heads home, presumably to a land that is still connected to the basic tenets of human compassion and charity.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald presents a world in which value systems have gone out of balance. He is not espousing a heavy-handed Christian message, but rather he is encouraging readers to stop and take inventory of their lives. Although some may see Fitzgerald as implying a return to God is necessary for survival, the text supports something far more subtle: Fitzgerald is urging a reconsideration of where society is and where it is going

