

Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Lecture 14

The Hollowness of the Upper Class/Themes

One of the major topics explored in *The Great Gatsby* is the sociology of wealth, specifically, how the newly minted millionaires of the 1920s differ from and relate to the old aristocracy of the country's richest families. In the novel, West Egg and its denizens represent the newly rich, while East Egg and its denizens, especially Daisy and Tom, represent the old aristocracy. Fitzgerald portrays the newly rich as being vulgar, gaudy, ostentatious, and lacking in social graces and taste. Gatsby, for example, lives in a monstrously ornate mansion, wears a pink suit, drives a Rolls-Royce, and does not pick up on subtle social signals. In contrast, the old aristocracy possesses grace, taste, subtlety, and elegance, epitomized by the Buchanans' tasteful home and the flowing white dresses of Daisy and Jordan Baker. What the old aristocracy possesses in taste, however, it seems to lack in heart, as the East Eggers prove themselves careless, inconsiderate bullies who are so used to money's ability to ease their minds that they never worry about hurting others. The Buchanans exemplify this stereotype when, at the end of the novel, they simply move to a new house far away rather than condescend to attend Gatsby's funeral. Gatsby, on the other hand, whose recent wealth derives from criminal activity, has a sincere

and loyal heart, remaining outside Daisy's window until four in the morning in Chapter 7 simply to make sure that Tom does not hurt her. Ironically, Gatsby's good qualities (loyalty and love) lead to his death, as he takes the blame for killing Myrtle rather than letting Daisy be punished, and the Buchanans' bad qualities (fickleness and selfishness) allow them to remove themselves from the tragedy not only physically but psychologically.

Class

In the world of *The Great Gatsby*, class influences all aspects of life, and especially love. Myrtle mentions this with regard to her husband, George, whom she mistook for someone of better "breeding" and hence greater prospects: "I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe." Similarly, Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is bound up with class. Only after amassing a large fortune does he feel able to make his move. At the end of the book, class dynamics dictate which marriage survives (Tom and Daisy), which one is destroyed (George and Myrtle), and which one will never come to be (Gatsby and Daisy). Only the most affluent couple pulls through the events that conclude the book. In fact, it seems that the accident may have brought them closer. When Nick spies on them through the window, he reports that "there was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together." Because of their elite class status, Tom and Daisy share a belief that they are immune to the consequences of their actions. In the final chapter, Nick calls Tom and Daisy "careless people" who

“smashed up things and . . . let other people clean up the mess they had made.”