

Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Lecture 16

The Meaning and Significance of the Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby*

In the world of the novel, which is so much about the stark differences between the rich, the strivers, and the poor, **the valley of ashes stands for the forgotten poor underclass who enable the lifestyle of the wealthy few**. The people who live and work there are the factory employees whose production is driving the construction boom that supplies the residents of West Egg with wealth and also allows the criminal underclass to prosper by creating fake bonds to cash in (this is the illegal activity that Gatsby tempts Nick with).

This region of industrial production is shown burying its inhabitants in the polluted byproduct of its factories: ash that covers everything from cars to buildings to people. This literal burial has a symbolic meaning as well, **as those who cannot connive their way to the top are left behind to stagnate. The valley is a place of hopelessness, of loss, and of giving up**. Highlighting this is the fact that Myrtle Wilson is the only ash heaps resident who isn't covered in the gray dust—she has enough ambition to try to hitch her wagon to Tom, and she hopes to the very last that he will be her ticket out of this life. On the other hand, although Wilson also tries to

leave the ash heaps by moving to a different part of the state, his defeatist attitude and general weakness doom his escape attempt to failure.