

About the author

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1896. He was a student of St. Paul Academy, the Newman School, and had attended Princeton for a short while. In 1917 he joined the army and was posted in Montgomery, Alabama. This is where he would meet his future wife Zelda Sayre but first he had to make some money to impress her. Having his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, published and becoming a best-seller accomplished this. He was published at the age of only 23 and was regarded as the speaker for the 'Jazz Age'. Pretty soon though things started to take a turn for the worse. Zelda's schizophrenia and Fitzgerald's drinking problem led Fitzgerald to rely mostly on his short stories for income. Slowly they started to lose their appeal as well. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald ended up dying in Hollywood on December 21, 1940.

About the 1920s

These years were known as the 'Roaring Twenties' because the economy at the time was through the roof and people were partying all over the place. At the time there was a legal ban on the manufacture and sale of an intoxicating drink called prohibition. Since a lot of people didn't feel like drinking the gin they made in their bathtubs all the time there was a huge market for organised crime. Organised criminals catered to the needs of the drinking public by illegally supplying them with liquor and made a fortune doing it. Even with all the crime in the 'Jazz Age' though, it will still be remembered for its glittering lights and unbridled romance.



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Chapter summaries

Chapter One

We are introduced to Nick Carraway the narrator. Nick is portrayed as a nice honest person who listens to everyone's problems. Tom and Daisy Buchanan are introduced. Nick does not like Tom too much. Jordan Baker the woman golfer is introduced. Hints are given about problems between Daisy and Tom. Tom is having an affair under Daisy's nose. Gatsby is seen for the first time.

Chapter Two

Myrtle Wilson is introduced; she is the woman having the affair with Tom. Tom and Myrtle fight, Tom breaks Myrtle's nose. We find out that Myrtle is in a different social class than Tom when Myrtle buys the tabloid at the news-stand instead of a classy magazine. Myrtle's husband is intimidated by Tom.

Chapter Three

Gatsby has a huge party. Gatsby does not socialise though. Rumours are going around about Gatsby. We see Jay and his mansion for the first time.

Chapter Four

We find out about Gatsby's life, how he went to Oxford, inherited his fortune from his family etc. Gatsby introduces us to Mr. Wolfsheimer who is involved in organised crime; this indicates that Gatsby could be involved too. We learn about Gatsby and Daisy for the first time through Jordan. Nick will set up a meeting between the two.

Chapter Five

Daisy and Gatsby are reunited through Nick. Gatsby shows Daisy that he now has more wealth than he used to. Everyone is materialistic, except Nick. Gatsby is a little disappointed because Daisy is not as perfect as he remembered.

Chapter Six

Gatsby has another party. Gatsby's life story is completely revealed. Gatsby's obsession with Daisy is also revealed more clearly. Tom and Jay have a confrontation.

Chapter Seven

Nick meets Daisy's daughter. Tom figures out what is going on between Gatsby and Daisy and becomes very upset. Gatsby tells Daisy to tell Tom that she never loved him. Wilson discovers Myrtle's unfaithfulness. Wilson locks up Myrtle but she escapes. However, she is hit by Gatsby's car while escaping and killed.

Chapter Eight

We find out that Daisy was the one in the driver's seat of Gatsby's car. Wilson goes nuts because he can't take what Myrtle did to him. Wilson kills Gatsby because it was his car that killed Myrtle. Wilson commits suicide.

Chapter Nine

Nick makes plans for the funeral. At Gatsby's funeral three people show up. Nick returns to the west. Nick meets with Tom Buchanan Nick gets a last view of Gatsby's house.

Gatsby timeline

1890	Gatsby is born. Since Gatsby is 17 when he meets Dan Cody in 1907, he was born in 1890.
1892	Nick Carraway is born. Since Nick is 30 in 1922, ('I'm thirty, five years too old to lie...') he was born in 1892.
1898	The Spanish-American war breaks out over territories in Cuba.
1899	Daisy Fay is born. Daisy was 18 when she met Gatsby in 1917, so Daisy was born in 1899.
1902	Dan Cody, Gatsby's mentor, buys his yacht and begins his ten year trek. 'Ella Kaye, the newspaper woman, played Madame de Maintenon to his weakness and sent him to sea in a yacht, were common knowledge to the turgid sub-journalism of 1902.'
1907	At the age of 17, Gatsby joins Cody in Girl Bay and sails the seas with him for five years. 'He had been coasting along all too hospitable shores for five years when he turned up as James Gatz's destiny in Little Girl Bay.'
1912	Dan Cody dies. 'The arrangement lasted five years ... one night in Boston and a week later Dan Cody inhospitably died.'
1914	World War I begins.
1915	Nick Carraway graduates from New Haven at the age of 23. 'I graduated from New Haven in 1915' and since he was born in 1892, in 1915 he is 23.
1917	Daisy and Gatsby meet in Louisville Daisy is 18, Gatsby, 27, 'Her white roadster was beside the curb, and she was sitting in it with a lieutenant I had never seen before....His name was Jay Gatsby'. 'The largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy Fay's house. She was just eighteen,' and since Gatsby was 17 in 1907, he is 27 in 1917.
1917	The United States of America enters World War I, and Jay Gatsby fights for his country.
1919	Jay Gatsby meets his future partner, Meyer Wolfsheim. 'I remember when I first met him, a young major just out of the army.'
1919	Meyer Wolfsheim fixes the 1919 World's Series. Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler. He's the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919."
1919	The 18th amendment of the constitution is ratified, prohibiting the sale of liquor.
1922	The main time period of the book in which most of it takes place. Jay Gatsby dies at the age of 32
1924	Nick Carraway, (with help from F. Scott Fitzgerald) tells the reader the story of The Great Gatsby. 'After two years, I remember the rest of that day.'

Character descriptions:

Nick Carraway:

Nick Carraway is the narrator of this story. As you can see on the first page Nick holds himself in higher esteem than the other characters in the novel. Even though Nick is the narrator he should not be completely trusted. On the first page he boasts about not judging people yet throughout the story he's judging people. The only person who he envies is Gatsby. Nick says about Gatsby, 'He has an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.' Nick left the mid-west to be a stock broker in New York but didn't get rich, yet everywhere he looks these amoral people are rolling in the wealth.

Jay Gatsby:

Gatsby is the rich, majestic, protagonist of the novel. While it isn't clear how he made all his money it is obvious that it was through illegal dealings in organised crime. It is also clear that the driving motivation for getting all this cash is so that it will appeal to Daisy. Daisy was the rich girl that he fell in love with before he joined the service. Unfortunately he just didn't have enough money to keep her while he was overseas. When Gatsby got back she was married to someone else but that didn't dissuade him in the least. Gatsby's whole efforts in this book are focused on trying to bring him and Daisy back to the point of time before he joined the army. Gatsby says it himself - 'Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!'

Daisy Buchanan:

Daisy is the woman Gatsby is trying to win back and coincidentally she is also Nick's second cousin. Daisy doesn't have a strong will and she cracks under pressure as will be shown late in the book in the hotel scene. She is the original material girl and focuses on the outward instead of the inward. Tom bought her love with a three hundred thousand dollar necklace, and now Gatsby is doing it with a huge mansion and a lot of nice shirts.

Tom Buchanan:

Tom is the antagonist in this novel. While Gatsby was fighting in World War I Tom was using his wealth to sweep Daisy off her feet. Tom is a yuppie and clearly in the way of Gatsby's love for Daisy. He is having an affair, which he makes no attempt to keep secret, with Myrtle Wilson while stringing along Myrtle's husband on a business deal. He treats Myrtle even worse than Daisy because in his eyes Daisy is worth a three hundred thousand dollar pearl necklace while Myrtle is worth a dog leash. With that fact in mind it is reasonable to assume Fitzgerald is telling us that Tom considers Myrtle to be his pet dog.

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Jordan Baker:

Jordan is the woman in this story who connects Gatsby to Nick and consequently Gatsby to Daisy. Jordan is also a friend of Daisy's while she has something going with Nick during the story. She has short hair and plays golf which back in the twenties was uncommon for women. Therefore you can assume she acts like a guy. She is very into the 'Roaring Twenties' party scene and is carelessly going through life. The carelessness comes out when she's driving with Nick:

Nick:	You're a rotten driver, either you ought to be more careful or you oughtn't to drive at all.
Jordan:	I am careful.
Nick:	No you're not.
Jordan:	Well, other people are.
Nick:	What's that got to do with it?
Jordan:	They'll keep out of my way, it takes two to make an accident
Nick:	Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself?
Jordan:	I hope I never will, I hate careless people. That's why I like you.

This also tags her as a hypocrite when she says 'I hate careless people' being a careless person herself.

Myrtle Wilson:

She's the woman Tom is having an affair with. She lets Tom push her around and treat her however he wants and she likes it. Tom has all the money and leads the life she wants to be a part of. She always thought she should have done better than her current husband and having an affair with Tom reinforces this belief of hers. Her current husband, George Wilson, is just a poor gas station owner in the Valley of Ashes who had to borrow a tuxedo for his wedding. Myrtle would rather be treated like a dog by someone who has money instead of being cared for by someone who has no money.

George Wilson:

George is married to a woman who resents him and is having an affair right under his nose without him knowing it. He runs a gas station that he lives above in the Valley of Ashes which is the dirtiest area of New York. The valley of Ashes has now become Queens if you were wondering where it was. That's not even the worst of it but I don't want to give up too much of the story so you'll just have to believe me. George Wilson is just the hard luck guy in this novel and he ends up taking it out on someone else in the end.

Meyer Wolfsheim:

While he may not be a major part of this novel he serves a purpose. He is Gatsby's connection to organised crime. He is the link that connects Gatsby to how he gained all his money. He supposedly in this novel is the one that fixed the World Series of 1919. He is also a close friend of Gatsby's.

Themes of the novel

1. The American Dream

This novel is filled with multiple themes but the main one focuses on the death of the American Dream. This can be explained by how Gatsby came to get his fortune. Through his dealings with organised crime he didn't adhere to the American Dream guidelines. Nick also suggests this with the manner in which he talks about all the rich characters in the story. The immoral people have all the money. Of course looking over all this like the eyes of God are those of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg on the billboard.

2. Repeating the past

The second theme that needs to be acknowledged is the idea of repeating the past. Gatsby's whole being since going off to war is devoted to getting back together with Daisy and have things be the way they were before he left. That's why Gatsby got a house like the one Daisy used to live in right across the bay from where she lives. He expresses this desire by reaching towards the green light on her porch early in the book. The last paragraph, 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past' reinforces this theme.

3. Immorality

Fitzgerald was in his twenties when he wrote this novel and since he went to Princeton he was considered a spokesman for his generation. He wrote about the third theme which is the immorality that was besieging the 1920s. Organised crime was rampant, people were partying all the time, and affairs were common. (Fitzgerald portrays the latter particularly in the novel).

4. God - the all seeing eye

The eyes of T. J. Eckleburg convey a fourth theme in this novel. George Wilson compares them to the eyes of God looking over the Valley of Ashes. The unmoving eyes on the billboard look down on the Valley of Ashes and see all the immorality and garbage of the times. By the end of the novel you may have realised that this symbolises that God is dead.

Gatsby's pursuit of the American dream

The Great Gatsby, a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is about the American Dream, and the downfall of those who attempt to reach its illusionary goals. The attempt to capture the American Dream is central to many novels. This dream is different for different people, but in *The Great Gatsby*, for Jay, the dream is that through wealth and power, one can acquire happiness.

Jay Gatsby, the central figure of the story, is one character who longs for the past. Surprisingly he devotes most of his adult life trying to recapture it and, finally, dies in its pursuit. In the past, Jay had a love affair with the affluent Daisy. Knowing he could not marry her because of the difference in their social status, he leaves her to amass wealth to reach her economic standards. Once he acquires this wealth, he moves near to Daisy, 'Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay,' and throws extravagant parties, hoping by chance she might show up at one of them. He, himself, does not attend his parties but watches them from a distance. When this dream doesn't happen, he asks around casually if anyone knows her. Soon he meets Nick Carraway, a cousin of Daisy, who agrees to set up a meeting, 'He wants to know...if you'll invite Daisy to your house some afternoon and then let him come over.' Gatsby's personal dream symbolises the larger American Dream where all have the opportunity to get what they want.

Later, as we see in the Plaza Hotel, Jay still believes that Daisy loves him. He is convinced of this as is shown when he takes the blame for Myrtle's death. 'Was Daisy driving?' 'Yes...but of course I'll say I was.' He also watches and protects Daisy as she returns home. 'How long are you going to wait?' 'All night if necessary.' Jay cannot accept that the past is gone and done with. Jay is sure that he can capture his dream with wealth and influence. He believes that he acted for a good reason beyond his personal interest and that should guarantee success.

Nick attempts to show Jay the folly of his dream, but Jay innocently replies to Nick's assertion that the past cannot be relived by saying, 'Yes you can, old sport.' This shows the confidence that Jay has in fulfilling his American Dream. For Jay, his American Dream is not material possessions, although it may seem that way. He only comes into riches so that he can fulfil his true American Dream - Daisy.

Gatsby doesn't rest until his American Dream is finally fulfilled. However, it never comes about and he ends up paying the ultimate price for it. The idea of the American Dream still holds true in today's time, be it wealth, love, or fame. But one thing never changes about the American Dream; everyone desires something in life, and everyone, somehow, strives to get it. Gatsby is a prime example of pursuing the American Dream.

The corruption of the American Dream

What is the Dream?

The belief that anything is possible as long as you strive to succeed. The foundation qualities of the American Dream depicted in *The Great Gatsby* are perseverance and hope. The most glorified of these characteristics is that of success against all odds. The ethic of hard work can be found in the life of young James Gatz, whose focus on becoming a great man is carefully documented in his 'Hopalong Cassidy' journal. When Mr Gatz shows the tattered book to Nick, he declares, 'Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Do you notice what he's got about improving his mind? He was always great for that.' The journal portrays the continual struggle for self-improvement which has defined the image of America as a land of opportunity. By comparing the young James Gatz to the young Benjamin Franklin, Fitzgerald proves that the American Dream is indeed able to survive in the face of modern society. The product of hard work is the wistful Jay Gatsby, who epitomizes the purest characteristic of the American Dream: everlasting hope. His burning desire to win Daisy's love symbolises the basis of the old dream: an ethereal goal and a never-ending search for the opportunity to reach that goal. Gatsby is first seen late at night, 'standing with his hands in his pockets' and supposedly 'out to determine what share was his of our local heavens'. Nick watches Gatsby's movements and comments:

'he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, as far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward--and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of the dock.'

By analysing high society during the 1920s through the eyes of narrator Nick Carraway, the author reveals that the American Dream has transformed from a pure ideal of security into a convoluted scheme of materialistic power. In support of this message, Fitzgerald highlights the original aspects as well as the new aspects of the American Dream in his tragic story to illustrate that a once impervious dream is now lost forever to the American people.

Gatsby's goal gives him a purpose in life and sets him apart from the rest of the upper class. He is constantly striving to reach Daisy, from the moment he is seen reaching towards her house in East Egg to the final days of his life, patiently waiting outside Daisy's house for hours when she has already decided to abandon her affair with him. Gatsby is distinguished as a man who retains some of the purest traits of the old dream, but loses them by attempting to reach his goals by wearing the dream's modern face.

Fitzgerald attributes the depravity of the modern dream to wealth, privilege, and the void of humanity that those aspects create. Money is clearly identified as the central proponent of the dream's destruction; it becomes easily entangled with hope and success, inevitably replacing their places in the American Dream with materialism. This replacement is

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evident in Gatsby's use of illegal practices and underground connections to attain his enormous fortune. His ostentatious parties, boundless mansion, and lavish clothing are all

signs of his unknowing corruption. His ability to evade the law, demonstrated when his traffic violation is ignored by a police officer, reveals his use of status and privilege to get what he needs. Although Gatsby's rise to prominence is symbolic of the nature of the new dream, the most odious qualities of that dream are evident in Daisy and Tom Buchanan, who live their lives with no hopes and no regrets because the true foundation of their characters is their opulence. While Daisy is never heard from again after Gatsby's death, Nick confronts Tom one last time, at which point Gatsby's rival responds: 'I told him the truth... What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him'. Tom admits to the fact that he is responsible for Gatsby's murder and Wilson's suicide, but continues to claim innocence because he has never known guilt nor shame as a member of the established elite. Through Nick, Fitzgerald pinpoints the effect of the modern dream on the upper class, thus condemning an entire people and its revered society:

'It couldn't forgive him or like him but I saw what he had done was, to him, entirely justified... They were careless people, Tom and Daisy -- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made ...'

Nick realises that Tom and Daisy represent a class of heartless citizens who have attained success at the cost of dehumanisation. Their vast wealth blocks out all inspiration and all true emotion, resulting in a void of apathy buttressed by status and power.

At the end of the novel, Fitzgerald creates a sense of utter hopelessness to prove that the purity of the American Dream is dead with the examples Daisy's baby, Gatsby's death, and Wilson's suicide. The first hint of this tragic loss is the introduction of the Buchanans' daughter, whom Daisy refers to as 'Bles-sed pre-cious.' When the girl is brought into the Buchanans' salon, Nick observes an obvious disturbance in Gatsby's attitude, thinking, 'Gatsby and I in turn leaned down and took the small reluctant hand. Afterward he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don't think he had ever really believed in its existence before'. Daisy then calls her child an 'absolute little dream', crushing all hopes Gatsby has of truly recreating the past. Society's complete replacement of the American Dream with materialism is pointed out moments later, when Nick and Gatsby attempt to discern the charm in Daisy's voice. At the moment Gatsby blurts out, 'Her voice is full of money', Nick stumbles across a revelation which changes his entire view of society:

'That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money - that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it ... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl ...'

At this point, all of Daisy's charm and beauty is stripped away, leaving nothing but money to be admired underneath. The dream Gatsby has been so inexorably pursuing is ripped apart into dollar bills as he discovers that for years he has been pursuing not love, but cold, hard, money, hidden behind the disguise of a human face. Subsequently, when Gatsby dies, any chance the American Dream has of surviving in the dehumanized modern world dies with

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him. The hopes and dreams which have strengthened and uplifted Gatsby are shattered as he lies in the pool, dazed and confused in a world which he no longer understands. After shooting Gatsby, George Wilson, Fitzgerald's symbolization of the common man struggling to achieve his own success within the realm of the modern dream, commits suicide. At the end of the novel, Nick returns to the mid-west with this disconcerting knowledge, reflecting on Gatsby's life as the struggle of the American people in a society losing its humanity: 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past'. The dream is now utterly lost and can never be resurrected.

Through the unfolding events of a doomed romance, Fitzgerald simultaneously unfolds the tragic fate of American values. Gatsby and the other characters of his story act as vessels for the author's true message- the American Dream, once a pure and mighty ideal, has been buried and is pressed into the ground by the inhuman void of money. *The Great Gatsby* is not the eulogy of a man named Jay Gatsby; rather, it is the eulogy of an institution which once was, but is now gone and can never be.

Style: poetic language

Complete the gaps in the extract below

We walked through a high hallway into a bright space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming against the grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze through the room, curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up towards the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were up as though upon an anchored They were both in, and their dresses were and as if they had just been back in after a short flight around the house.

Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught died out about the room, and the and the rugs and the two young women slowly to the floor.

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Use the space below to add any notes about what you notice about the extract. You could consider: the rhythm of the prose, use of recurring images and phrases, what we learn about the two main characters in the novel, how a fantastical atmosphere is evoked.



Nasty Nick: the other side of the unjudgemental narrator...

Nick Carraway has a special place in this novel. It is through his eyes and ears that we form our opinions of the other characters.

Often, readers of this novel confuse Nick's stance towards those characters and the world he describes with those of F. Scott Fitzgerald's because the fictional world he has created closely resembles the world he himself experienced. But not every narrator is the voice of the author. Before considering the gap between author and narrator, we should remember how, as readers, we respond to the narrator's perspective, especially when that voice belongs to a character who, like Nick, is an active participant in the story.

When we read any work of fiction, no matter how realistic or fabulous, as readers, we undergo a suspension of disbelief. The fictional world creates a new set of boundaries, making possible or credible events and reactions that might not commonly occur in the real world, but which have logic or plausibility to them in that fictional world.

In order for this to be convincing, we trust the narrator. We take on his perspective, if not totally, then substantially. He becomes our eyes and ears in this world and we have to see him as reliable if we are to proceed with the story's development.

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In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick goes to some length to establish his credibility, indeed his moral integrity, in telling this story about this 'great' man called Gatsby. He begins with a reflection on his own upbringing, quoting his father's words about Nick's 'advantages', which we could assume were material but, he soon makes clear, were spiritual or moral advantages.

Nick wants his reader to know that his upbringing gave him the moral fibre with which to withstand and pass judgement on an amoral world, such as the one he had observed the previous summer. He says, rather pompously, that as a consequence of such an upbringing, he is 'inclined to reserve all judgements' about other people, but then goes on to say that such 'tolerance . . . has a limit'.

This is the first sign that we can trust this narrator to give us an even-handed insight to the story that is about to unfold. But, as we later learn, he neither reserves all judgements nor does his tolerance reach its limit. Nick is very partial in his way of telling the story about several characters.

He admits early into the story that he makes an exception of judging Gatsby, for whom he is prepared to suspend both the moral code of his upbringing and the limit of intolerance, because Gatsby had an 'extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness'. This inspired him to a level of friendship and loyalty that Nick seems unprepared to extend towards others in the novel.

Nick overlooks the moral implications of Gatsby's bootlegging; his association with speakeasies, and with Meyer Wolfsheim, the man rumoured to have fixed the World Series in 1919. Yet, he is contemptuous of Jordan Baker for cheating in a mere golf game. And while he says that he is prepared to forgive this sort of behaviour in a woman: 'It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply - I was casually sorry, and then I forgot,' it seems that he cannot accept her for being 'incurably dishonest' and then reflects that his one 'cardinal virtue' is that he is 'one of the few honest people' he has ever known. When it comes to judging women - or perhaps only potential lovers - not only are they judged, they are judged by how well they stand up to his own virtues.

Nick leaves the mid-west after he returns from the war, understandably restless and at odds with the traditional, conservative values that, from his account, haven't changed in spite of the tumult of the war. It is this insularity from a changed world no longer structured by the values that had sent young men to war, that decides him to go East, to New York, and learn about bonds.

But after one summer out East, a remarkable summer for this morally advantaged young man, he 'decided to come back home' to the security of what is familiar and traditional. He sought a return to the safety of a place where houses were referred to by the names of families that had inhabited them for generations; a security that Nick decides makes Westerners 'subtly unadaptable to Eastern life'. By this stage, the East had become for him the 'grotesque' stuff of his nightmares.

What does this return home tell us about Nick? It is entirely reasonable that he would be adversely affected by the events of that summer: the death of a woman he met briefly and

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indirectly, who was having an affair with his cousin's husband and whose death leads to the death of his next-door neighbour. His decision to return home to that place that he had so recently condemned for its insularity, makes one wonder what Nick was doing during the war? If the extent and the pointlessness of death and destruction during the war had left him feeling he'd outgrown the comfort and security of the West, why has the armoury he acquired from the war abandoned him after this one summer's events?

Don't we perhaps feel a little let down that Nick runs away from his experience in the East in much the same way that he has run away from that 'tangle back home' to whom he writes letters and signs 'with love', but clearly doesn't genuinely offer? Is it unfair to want more from our narrator, to show some kind of development in his emotional make-up? It is unfair to suggest that this return home is like a retreat from life and a kind of emotional regression?

The only genuine affection in the novel is shown by Nick towards Gatsby. He admires Gatsby's optimism, an attitude that is out of step with the sordidness of the times. Fitzgerald illustrates this sordidness not just in the Valley of Ashes, but right there beneath the thin veneer of the opulence represented by Daisy and Tom. Nick is 'in love' with Gatsby's capacity to dream and ability to live as if the dream were to come true, and it is this that clouds his judgement of Gatsby and therefore obscures our grasp on Gatsby.

When Gatsby takes Nick to one side and tells him of his origins, he starts to say that he was 'the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West - all dead now ...' The truth (of his origins) doesn't matter to Gatsby; what matters to him is being part of Daisy's world or Daisy being a part of his. Gatsby's sense of what is true and real is of an entirely other order to Nick's. If he were motivated by truth, Gatsby would still be poor Jay Gatz with a hopelessly futile dream.

Recall the passage where Nick says to Gatsby that you can't repeat the past, and Gatsby's incredulity at this. Nick begins to understand for the first time the level of Gatsby's desire for a Daisy who no longer exists. It astounds Nick: 'I gathered that he wanted to recover something ... that had gone into loving Daisy ... Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees ... Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something - an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago.'

These are Nick's words. Whose 'appalling sentimentality' is operating here? Has Nick reported any of Gatsby's words - which comprise so little of the novel - to suggest that he would even begin to put his love for Daisy in these 'sentimental' terms? Is not this excess of sentiment in fact Nick's sentiment for Gatsby or perhaps Nick's attempt at displaying those 'rather literary' days he had in college? Or both?

We should consider the distance that Fitzgerald has created between his presence in the story and Nick's and their implications. Fitzgerald has created a most interesting character in Nick because he is very much a fallible storyteller.

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When an author unsettles an accepted convention in the art of storytelling by creating a narrator like Nick, it draws attention to the story as fiction, as artifice. Ironically, in doing this, he has created in Nick a figure who more closely resembles an average human being and thus has heightened the realism of the novel.

Why is *The Great Gatsby* liked by readers?

On one level the novel comments on the careless gaiety and moral decadence of the period. It contains innumerable references to the contemporary scene. The wild extravagance of Gatsby's parties, the shallowness and aimlessness of the guests and the hint of Gatsby's involvement in crime all identify the period and the American setting. But as a piece of social commentary *The Great Gatsby* also describes the failure of the American dream, from the point of view that American political ideals conflict with the actual social conditions that exist. For whereas American democracy is based on the idea of equality among people, the truth is that social discrimination still exists and the divisions among the classes cannot be overcome. Myrtle's attempt to break into the group to which the Buchanans belong is doomed to fail. Taking advantage of her vivacity, her lively nature, she seeks to escape from her own class. She enters into an affair with Tom and takes on his way of living. But she only becomes vulgar and corrupt like the rich. She scorns people from her own class and loses all sense of morality. And for all her social ambition, Myrtle never succeeds in her attempt to find a place for herself in Tom's class. When it comes to a crisis, the rich stand together against all outsiders.

Myrtle's condition, of course, is a weaker reflection of Gatsby's more significant struggle. While Myrtle's desire springs from social ambition, Gatsby's is related more to his idealism, his faith in life's possibilities. Undoubtedly, his desire is also influenced by social considerations; Daisy, who is wealthy and beautiful, represents a way of life which is remote from Gatsby's and therefore more attractive because it is out of reach. However, social consciousness is not a basic cause. It merely directs and increases Gatsby's belief in life's possibilities. Like Myrtle, Gatsby struggles to fit himself into another social group, but his attempt is more urgent because his whole faith in life is involved in it. Failure, therefore, is more terrible for him. His whole career, his confidence in himself and in life is totally shattered when he fails to win Daisy. His death when it comes is almost insignificant, for, with the collapse of his dream, Gatsby is already spiritually dead.

As social satire, *The Great Gatsby* is also a comment on moral decadence in modern American society. The concern here is with the corruption of values and the decline of spiritual life - a condition which is ultimately related to the American Dream. For the novel recalls the early idealism of the first settlers. Fitzgerald himself relates Gatsby's dream to that of the early Americans for, at the end of the novel, Nick recalls the former Dutch sailors and compares their sense of wonder with Gatsby's hope. The book also seems to investigate how Americans lost their spiritual purpose as material success wiped out spiritual goals. The lives of the Buchanans, therefore, filled with material comforts and luxuries, and empty of purpose, represents this condition. Daisy's lament is especially indicative of this: 'What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?' cried Daisy, 'and the day after that, and the next thirty years?'

Study pack

Fitzgerald stresses the need for hope and dreams to give meaning and purpose to man's efforts. Striving towards some ideal is the way by which man can feel a sense of involvement, a sense of his own identity. Certainly, Gatsby, with 'his extraordinary gift of hope', set against the empty existence of Tom and Daisy, seems to achieve a heroic greatness. Fitzgerald goes on to state that the failure of hopes and dreams, the failure of the American Dream itself, is unavoidable, not only because reality cannot keep up with ideals, but also because the ideals are in any case usually too fantastic to be realised. The heroic presentation of Gatsby, therefore, should not be taken at face value, for we cannot overlook the fact that Gatsby is naive, impractical and over-sentimental. It is this which makes him attempt the impossible, to repeat the past. There is something pitiful and absurd about the way he refuses to grow up.

Notes on style: fantastic and realistic

- Particularly noted where commentary and conversation are mixed.
- Dialogue is often realistic and records the banal everyday conversations that do take place.
- Contrasted with Nick's often complex and poetic commentary.
- Myrtle Wilson's town apartment: example. page 33. From: 'I married him because I thought he was a gentleman...Myrtle pulled her chair close to mine...'
- Fitzgerald manages to place the fantastic and the bizarre next to the real and mundane. Valley of Ashes another example.
- Lack of separation between the dream world and real world points towards a major theme of the text and Gatsby's inability to divorce the two.

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