

A STUDY GUIDE TO

F. Scott Fitzgerald's

The Great Gatsby

STUDY BOOKLET INCLUDES:

- Character List
- Scene-by-Scene Synopsis
- Glossary of Terms
- Sample Test and Review Questions
- Study References for Books, Music, Film



Because books are long and life is short.™

*The Notes
to
F. Scott Fitzgerald's*
THE GREAT GATSBY

1994

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List of **CHARACTERS**

NICK CARRAWAY

The narrator of the story. A thirty-year-old man who moves to New York to learn the bond business. He rents a small bungalow next to Gatsby's mansion.

JAY GATSBY

The mysterious, wealthy socialite who hides his impoverished past. He and Daisy fell in love before he was shipped overseas to fight in the war.

DAISY BUCHANAN

Nick's distant cousin. Beautiful and sophisticated, Daisy traded love for the opportunity to be a wealthy man's wife. She and Tom have a three-year-old daughter.

TOM BUCHANAN

Daisy's wealthy, brutal husband who openly keeps a mistress and espouses white supremacy.

JORDAN BAKER

The attractive and self-sufficient young woman who becomes involved with Nick. She's a champion golfer and a childhood friend of Daisy's.

MYRTLE WILSON

Tom Buchanan's stout but sensual mistress. Rather coarse, she tries to affect an air of refinement when she's with Tom in New York.

GEORGE WILSON

Myrtle's sickly husband who owns the garage where he repairs and sells cars.

MEYER WOLFSHEIM

A gambler and business associate of Gatsby, he's the man who fixed the World Series in 1919.

DAN CODY

The millionaire who hired the young Gatsby as his personal assistant.

MICHAELIS

The Greek owner of the coffee shop next to George Wilson's garage. He relates the details of the Wilsons' fight, Myrtle's flight into the path of Gatsby's yellow car, and George's suspicions about his wife's infidelity.

HENRY C. GATZ

Jay Gatsby's father from Minnesota.

THE OWL-EYED MAN

Other than Nick and Henry Gatz, he's the only mourner at Gatsby's funeral. At an earlier party, the owl-eyed man drunkenly confides in Nick that all the books in Gatsby's library are real.

DR. T. J. ECKLEBURG

Although only a billboard advertising an optometrist's services, the giant eyes peering out over the valley of ashes through their pair of yellow spectacles play an important role in the novel.

Summary **OUTLINE**

INTRODUCTION

➤ *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's story of love and ambition, takes place in the United States during the Roaring Twenties. Shell shocked by the brutality of World War I, many of Fitzgerald's contemporaries escape into the decadence of this era, when the American promise of prosperity and success, regardless of personal background, was at its height. Fitzgerald's novel, with its tragic overtones, addresses the cost of that mythic prosperity.

➤ Fitzgerald himself embodied the image of the successful American. Securing an admiring public with his early writing, he married a southern belle, Zelda Sayre, and enjoyed a life filled with travels and parties. The festivities were checked when *The Great Gatsby* appeared in 1925 before a torrent of uncomplimentary critical and popular reviews. Fitzgerald began to drink heavily, and Zelda was admitted into a mental institution. After a nervous breakdown, Fitzgerald recovered enough to write a few screenplays for Hollywood, then died from a series of heart attacks at the age of forty-four.

➤ A few respected writers of the 1920s acknowledged what readers from the '50s would discover: the brilliance of *The Great Gatsby*. Critics cite its nonlinear sequential order as a modernist storytelling technique. The narrator, Nick Carraway, detours through time as he pieces his story together, constantly reminding readers of his presence and lending to the work a structure with which to view the circuitous action of the novel. Carraway

also plays an important role as a character within the book, and his double perspective manipulates our understanding of the characters.

➤ *The Great Gatsby* hints at the fraudulent and destructive side of the American Dream. Fitzgerald suggests that the level of wealth the characters attain within the novel can be reached only by forsaking their true emotions and a sense of purpose in their lives. Gatsby is offered as the exception: he is redeemed by his singular desire to win the woman he loves.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

➤ The novel begins with the speaker, Nick Carraway, sharing some advice his father gave him: be tolerant of people who grew up without your advantages. Because of his experiences the year before in New York, Nick finds it difficult to maintain such tolerance, and he proceeds to explain why.

➤ Restlessness urged Nick Carraway to leave his Midwestern home for the East Coast after he returned from World War I. Deciding to learn the bond business, he settles in the wealthy suburb of West Egg, Long Island. In the more affluent community of East Egg live Tom and Daisy Buchanan. Nick knows Tom from their days at Yale, and Daisy is Nick's distant cousin. While dining at their home, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a female golf champion. During their conversation, Jordan mentions a man named Jay Gatsby. Before Nick can reply that Gatsby is his neighbor, Tom ushers the group in to dinner. As it's served, Tom expounds on his beliefs about white supremacy. Daisy tries to be charming, but there's a

hint of tension in the room, which escalates when Tom leaves to take a phone call, and Daisy rushes from the room. Jordan explains to Nick that the caller is Tom's mistress. Returning home that night, Nick catches sight of what must be Gatsby standing on the lawn. He's stretching out his arms toward a point across the bay. Nick decides not to interrupt this intense, private moment.

► Between West Egg and New York City lies an impoverished wasteland—a valley of ashes. Above the grayness and dust peer two gigantic, spectacled eyes painted on an aging billboard advertising the services of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. In that valley, Tom takes Nick to a dilapidated garage owned by George Wilson. Tom wants Nick to meet Myrtle, Tom's mistress and George's wife. Myrtle follows the men to New York City, and Nick is persuaded to join them at their apartment for a party. A very drunk Nick watches later as Tom and Myrtle argue over Daisy, and Tom breaks Myrtle's nose in a brutal gesture, introducing the theme of violence into the novel.

► Although Gatsby and Nick have never met, Gatsby invites Nick to one of his extravagant weekend parties. Nick joins Jordan at her table and listens to the guests offer gossip about their host's past. Gatsby is rumored to be everything from a German spy to a murderer. When Nick exchanges some words with a man who remembers Nick from the war, he's surprised when the man turns out to be Jay Gatsby himself. Later, Jordan is called into the house to speak privately with Gatsby. When she returns, she tells Nick their host has divulged an incredible story, but gives him no details as she is sworn to secrecy.

➤ Nick spends the next few weeks learning the bond business, seeing Jordan, and exploring New York City. One day, Gatsby drives Nick to the city for lunch in his gorgeous yellow car. Gatsby tells Nick about his wealthy, Oxford-educated background and the heroic part he played in the war. Nick is suspicious until Gatsby produces a medal for valor from Montenegro and a picture of himself with his friends at college. At lunch, Gatsby introduces Nick to Meyer Wolfsheim, a business acquaintance of Gatsby. Wolfsheim is an unsavory character who has the dubious honor of being the man who fixed the 1919 World Series. Nick's initial suspicions about his neighbor begin to return.

➤ The narration now shifts as Jordan tells Nick some of her memories of Daisy when she lived in St. Louis. Daisy had fallen in love with a young soldier who was to be sent overseas to fight. The soldier's name was Jay Gatsby. Daisy felt miserable—her parents had to stop her from going to New York to say goodbye to him—but eventually she met and married Tom, although not without getting drunk and trying to back out at the last minute. Nick resumes his role as narrator as he realizes Gatsby's presence across the bay from the Buchanans is no coincidence: everything Gatsby does is designed to win Daisy back. Impressed with his neighbor's devotion, Nick agrees to orchestrate a meeting between Daisy and Gatsby. Nick invites his cousin to tea where she “accidentally” sees Gatsby for the first time in five years. Later, Nick and Daisy follow Gatsby into his mansion, dumbfounded as their host displays his wealth, lingering over his wardrobe of fine shirts. Both Daisy and Nick understand that every

luxury Gatsby has acquired is proof of his love for her. Nick learns more about his neighbor's mysterious past as well. A young James Gatz, son of unsuccessful farmers, caught sight of millionaire Dan Cody's yacht. Impressed by Cody with his ambition, the 17-year-old Gatz was hired as a personal assistant and transformed himself into his ideal image of a man, calling himself Jay Gatsby.

▶ Nick and Jordan accompany Tom and Daisy to one of Gatsby's parties. The atmosphere has a sharp, unpleasant edge, and Tom implies that Gatsby's guests are lower class and their host a bootlegger. Daisy defends Gatsby, but with little conviction. When Nick speaks with Gatsby later, the host is dispirited by Daisy's failure to enjoy herself at the party, but he's even more determined to reinvent the past. Nick considers Gatsby's desire to return home and marry Daisy in her parent's house impossibly naive, but Gatsby brushes aside Nick's doubt, promising to "fix everything."

▶ Gatsby and Daisy continue seeing each other. One hot day, Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby visit the Buchanans for lunch. The hot, thick, summer air accentuates everyone's irritability. Daisy inadvertently reveals her affair with Gatsby, and the enraged Tom rushes the group off to town. Daisy climbs into a car with Gatsby, and Tom drives Nick and Jordan in Gatsby's larger yellow car. En route, Tom pulls the car into Wilson's garage where he learns that Wilson, having discovered his wife's infidelity, plans to take Myrtle out West. Nick notices Myrtle watching from her room above the garage, her face suffused with jealousy as she glares at

Jordan, whom she mistakes for Daisy. In a suite at the Plaza Hotel, Tom begins to interrogate Gatsby in order to destroy him in Daisy's eyes. Daisy takes Gatsby's side and tells Tom she's leaving him, although the more Tom hints at Gatsby's underworld connections, the more confused she becomes. She and Gatsby drive off in the yellow car. As the rest of the group leave, Nick suddenly realizes it's his thirtieth birthday.

► Michaelis, the Greek owner of the coffee shop next to Wilson's garage, now becomes the narrator. He explains that Myrtle and her husband were arguing when Myrtle suddenly ran into the street, waving her arms and shouting. A speeding yellow car slammed into her body, killing her. The driver of the car never stopped. When they hear the story, Nick and Tom both realize the car was Gatsby's. Later, Nick learns that Gatsby wasn't the driver—Daisy accidentally killed the woman who had run toward the car she believed was Tom's. Gatsby also tells Nick the true story of his past and his all-consuming love for Daisy. Nick tells Gatsby he's better than "the whole damn bunch put together."

► The story's viewpoint shifts again to Michaelis. Wilson has grown hysterical and believes that his wife had been deliberately run over by her lover. While Gatsby waits at home for Daisy's telephone call—a call that never comes—Wilson traces the yellow car to Gatsby and kills both Gatsby and himself. When Nick tries to phone the Buchanans about the murder, he discovers Daisy and Tom have already left town. Nick makes the funeral arrangements, but only Gatsby's father, Henry

Gatz, and the owl-eyed man from an earlier party join Nick at the cemetery. Disillusioned, Nick breaks up with Jordan and decides to return home to the Midwest. Before leaving, he meets Tom Buchanan on the street. When Nick accuses Tom of telling Wilson that Gatsby was driving the yellow car, Tom agrees, saying Gatsby got what he deserved. Nick realizes Daisy never told Tom the truth. On his last night in the East, Nick walks out to look at the Buchanans' home across the bay and ponders the elusiveness of one's hopes and dreams.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

➤ *The Great Gatsby* explores the intertwined themes of money and love. It criticizes the American Dream, showing that honest fortunes are not available to everyone. Even Jay Gatsby, who appeared to be the perfect embodiment of the dream, led a deceptive life. Through his determination he obtains great wealth, but he can never escape his lower class background and the source of his money, which Fitzgerald suggests is acquired through criminal activities. These two barriers destroy Gatsby's dream of ever recapturing Daisy's heart. Daisy may say she loves him, but in the end, she fails to match his passion, electing to retain her aristocratic lifestyle with Tom.

➤ Besides the issues of class and wealth, the characters must face a third enemy—time and its destructive denial of human perfection. Gatsby alone defies time with his insistence on eradicating the five years that have passed since he first loved Daisy. Daisy also wants to return to the innocence of her past, but she cannot dismiss those

years as easily as Gatsby. She does not comprehend that Gatsby's love for her transcends all social and temporal restraints: it makes Gatsby a truly great figure.

➤ Nick does understand this and, although he disapproves of Gatsby "from beginning to end," he recognizes the value of his friend's passion. His mixed attitude toward Gatsby reflects Fitzgerald's ambivalence toward his own generation. Allured by the glitter of the carefree Jazz Age, Fitzgerald also disapproved of the aimless wandering and emptiness lurking beneath the festivity. His novel analyzes a world in which people have replaced religion with the desperate pursuit of pleasure, and he transforms Dr. T. J. Eckleburg into the new god—a god of commerce who gazes malignantly over the valley of ashes, refusing to deliver justice to those who most deserve it.

➤ Unlike Gatsby, who cannot look beyond the single dream that possesses him, Fitzgerald presents in his novel a multifaceted view of the ambivalent relationship between wealth and morality. What is more, *The Great Gatsby* offers us a brilliant and tragic love story and a last line which reaffirms our capacity to hope and dream:

*So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

Glossary of **TERMS**

ROARING TWENTIES

A glamorous post-war period in early 20th-century America. An age of low morals and raised hemlines, of gangsters, Prohibition, and bootleg liquor. Also called the Jazz Age.

FLAPPERS

A nickname for women during the Jazz Age who bobbed their hair very short and wore tightly sheathed dresses that “flapped” around their legs as they danced.

PROHIBITION

The forbidding of the manufacture or sale of alcoholic beverages. Prohibition existed in the United States between 1920 and 1933.

MODERNISM

A term used to describe a style of literature and art produced in the years between World Wars I and II. Modernist writers experimented with new forms and styles, and their works developed the themes of isolation, displacement, and despair.

FIRST PERSON

A form of narration in which the narrator speaks as “I” and is also a character in the story. First-person narrators offer a limited point of view since they can only comment on the speech and actions of others, not having access to anyone’s thoughts or inner emotions but their own.

WEST EGG

A commuter town on Long Island, twenty miles from New York City. Given its name because of its shape, West Egg juts out into the Long Island Sound. Across the bay lies East Egg—the more fashionable of the two communities.

MONTENEGRO

A small republic in the former Yugoslavia. During World War I, Jay Gatsby claims to have received medals for valor from every Allied government; he shows Nick the one from Montenegro.

PLATONIC

Derived from the philosopher Plato. Nick uses the term to describe the transformation James Gatz undergoes to become Jay Gatsby: the conception of Gatsby was young Gatz's image of the ideal man.

BOOTLEGGGER

Someone who makes, sells, or smuggles an illegal substance, usually alcohol.

MINT JULEP

A frosted drink made from whiskey, sugar, and fresh mint, and considered a symbol of Southern gentility. Nick and the others plan to drink mint juleps at the Plaza Hotel but are hindered by Tom's abrupt verbal assault upon Gatsby.

ARMISTICE

A mutual truce to stop warfare. In the novel, the term refers to November 11, 1918, when the fighting in World War I ended.

HORATIO ALGER

Popular writer in the late 19th century whose stories of impoverished youths improving themselves through hard work helped fabricate the myth of the American Dream—a myth Fitzgerald criticizes in *The Great Gatsby*.

MONOMANIAC

Someone so obsessed with one idea or object that he or she pursues it at the expense of all other interests. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby's romantic, almost monomaniacal pursuit of Daisy as proof of his hero's greatness.

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Stern, Milton R., *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

Hoffmann, Frederick, ed., *The Great Gatsby: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

OTHER RECOMMENDED WORKS BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

This Side of Paradise (1920)

Tender is the Night (1934)

The Last Tycoon (1941)

Babylon Revisited and Other Stories (published 1960)

FILMS

The Great Gatsby (1949). Directed by Elliot Nugent.
Starring Alan Ladd, Macdonald Carey, and Betty Field.

The Great Gatsby (1974). Directed by Jack Clayton.
Screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola. Starring Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Karen Black, and Sam Waterston.

Study QUESTIONS

1. During what period in American history does Fitzgerald set *The Great Gatsby*?
2. What kind of response did the novel generate upon being published?
3. Who narrates the novel, and where is he from?
4. What are the names of the two Long Island communities where the characters live? How do the two differ?
5. What is Nick's previous connection to Daisy Buchanan? To Tom?
6. Under what circumstances does Nick first encounter Jay Gatsby?
7. What part does Dr. T. J. Eckleburg play in the novel?
8. Why does Tom strike Myrtle?
9. What is Nick's impression of Gatsby when they finally meet?
10. After having lunch with Meyer Wolfsheim, what does Nick begin to suspect about Gatsby?
11. What information does Jordan reveal to Nick about Daisy's past?
12. How does Gatsby arrange to meet Daisy again?
13. While touring his mansion, what does Gatsby show Daisy that moves her to tears? Why does she cry?
14. What are Gatsby's real origins? Under what circumstances did he "invent" himself?

15. In the Plaza Hotel, how does Daisy disappoint Gatsby?
16. Why does Myrtle run out on the road in front of the yellow car?
17. How does Gatsby die?
18. Who attends his funeral?
19. Why does the book's title call Gatsby "great"?

Answers to Study QUESTIONS

1. Fitzgerald set *The Great Gatsby* in the Roaring Twenties, during Prohibition in the United States. This era was also known as the Jazz Age.
2. *The Great Gatsby* was considered a disappointment. One newspaper headline called it a “dud.” Only about 20,000 copies of the book were sold during Fitzgerald’s lifetime.
3. The narrator of the novel is Nick Carraway, a young man from the Midwest who has come to New York to learn the bond business.
4. The two communities are called East Egg and West Egg. West Egg is a well-to-do community, but it cannot rival the splendor of East Egg, where the extremely wealthy live.
5. Nick is Daisy’s distant cousin. Nick and Tom attended Yale University together, although they were not close friends.
6. Nick returns home one night from dining with the Buchanans and sees a figure standing on the lawn of the neighboring mansion. This figure reaches out longingly to a green light winking across the bay. Later, Nick learns that it was Gatsby, gazing across the water at Daisy’s home.
7. Eckleburg is the optometrist whose billboard overlooks George Wilson’s garage. His huge blue eyes peer over the valley of ashes through his giant spectacles, and Wilson later confuses these eyes with the eyes of God.

8. Tom strikes Myrtle and breaks her nose when she continually repeats Daisy's name.
9. Nick finds Gatsby to be a little stiff and formal, but when he lets his guard down, he looks like an elegant young roughneck. Nick is most impressed by Gatsby's manner and smile, although he thinks Gatsby's habit of calling people "old sport" is rather absurd.
10. He suspects Gatsby may be involved in criminal activities.
11. Jordan tells Nick that Daisy and Gatsby were in love before he was sent overseas during the war. At first miserable, Daisy eventually began dating and married Tom, although not without getting drunk the night before the wedding and trying to back out of it.
12. Nick asks Daisy to come to tea at his house. Gatsby's arrival is to be a coincidence.
13. Gatsby pulls out an array of expensive shirts. Daisy cries because she realizes Gatsby has acquired everything—from his mansion down to the shirt on his back—only for her.
14. Gatsby's real name is James Gatz, and he is the son of poor farmers from North Dakota. When he was 17, he met millionaire Dan Cody and impressed him with his initiative. Gatz uses the opportunity to invent a new, glamorous image of himself.
15. Gatsby wants Daisy to erase the past five years by saying she loved only him, never Tom. Instead, Daisy confesses that she loved Tom, but loved Gatsby too.

16. Since Tom stopped earlier for gas at Wilson's garage, Myrtle thinks her lover is still driving the yellow car. She runs toward him, trying to flag the car down.
17. George Wilson shoots Gatsby while he's floating in his pool because he believes Gatsby was driving the car that killed Myrtle.
18. Even after Nick informed several people of Gatsby's death, the only mourners are Nick, Henry Gatz, and the owl-eyed man.
19. Gatsby may be called great for various reasons. He is great because he is wealthy and powerful and also because he rose above his poor beginnings. Yet Fitzgerald seems to imply that Gatsby's true greatness lies in his overpowering love for Daisy, a love that transcends all boundaries, including time.

Essay QUESTIONS

1. Consider the theme of the American Dream in this novel. What is it? Does Gatsby prove it to be true, false, or something in between?
2. The novel opens with Nick recalling his father's advice to be tolerant of others. Why does Fitzgerald choose this recollection for the novel's opening? How does Nick agree or disagree with this advice by the end of the novel, and how does he justify his choice?
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald once told Ernest Hemingway, "You know, the rich are different." Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money than we do." What is Fitzgerald's attitude toward the rich in *The Great Gatsby*? And how important is social class? Does Gatsby's fate reflect his wealth and social status?
4. Examine Gatsby's parties and how Fitzgerald presents them. Consider how they represent the spirit of the times and how they fit into the plot.
5. Select a passage from the novel that you especially like. Discuss Fitzgerald's style in the passage and the relationship of the passage to the novel as a whole.
6. Discuss Nick as a narrator and moral judge. To what extent is he Fitzgerald's mouthpiece? How does he gain credibility with the reader?

7. There are several recurring symbols in the novel—the green light, Daisy’s voice, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes, East and West Egg, and so on. Select a symbol from the novel and discuss its meaning. What is Fitzgerald’s purpose in using the symbol, and what does it contribute to the book’s meaning?
8. Discuss the differences and similarities between Myrtle Wilson and Daisy Buchanan. Compare each woman’s role in the novel: what does she add to the story, and what part does she play in Gatsby’s fate?
9. Discuss the power of the past in the novel. Pay close attention to the scenes that recall the past: Jordan’s description of Daisy’s wedding, Gatsby’s descriptions of his past, Nick’s description of his own past, and the hints about the past lives of Gatsby, Tom, and Jordan. Be sure to consider the significance of the book’s final line.
10. Writing of Fitzgerald, critic Lionel Trilling remarks, “The tragic hero can conceive and realize a love that is beyond . . . his powers . . . so that he is destroyed by the very thing that gives him spiritual status and stature.” Discuss the “greatness” of Gatsby’s love and how Fitzgerald feels about it.

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George Gershwin,

Preludes for Piano and Sleepless Night,

Los Angeles Philharmonic

conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

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