**NOVELS FOR STUDENTS: THE GREAT GATSBY**

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## I. Introduction:

In 1925, *The Great Gatsby* was published and hailed as an artistic and material success for its young author, F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is considered a vastly more mature and artistically masterful treatment of Fitzgerald's themes than his earlier fiction. These works examine the results of the Jazz Age generation's adherence to false material values. In nine chapters, Fitzgerald presents the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby, as related in a first-person narrative by Nick Carraway. Carraway reveals the story of a farmer's son-tumed racketeer, named Jay Gatz. His ill-gotten wealth is acquired solely to gain acceptance into the sophisticated, moneyed world of the woman he loves, Daisy Fay Buchanan. His romantic illusions about the power of money to buy respectability and the love of Daisy—the "golden girl" of his dreams—are skillfully and ironically interwoven with episodes that depict what Fitzgerald viewed as the callousness and moral irresponsibility of the affluent American society of the 1920s. America at this time experienced a cultural and lifestyle revolution. In the economic arena, the stock market boomed, the rich spent money on fabulous parties and expensive acquisitions, the automobile became a symbol of glamour and wealth, and profits were made, both legally and illegally. The whirlwind pace of this post-World War I era is captured in Fitzgerald's Gatsby, whose tragic quest and violent death foretell the collapse of that era and the onset of disillusionment with the American dream. By the end of the novel, the reader slowly realizes that Carraway is transformed as he recognizes Gatsby's moral superiority to the Buchanans. In fact, the triumph of Gatsby's legacy is reached by Nick Carraway's ruminations at the end of the book about Gatsby's valiant, however futile, attempts to regain his past love. The discrepancy between Gatsby's dream vision and reality is a prominent theme in this book. Other motifs in the book include Gatsby's quest for the American Dream; class conflict (the Wilsons vs. the Buchanans and the underworld lowbrows vs. Gatsby); the cultural rift between East and West; and the contrast between innocence and experience in the narrator's life. A rich aesthetic experience with many subtleties in tone and content, this novel can be read over and over again for new revelations and continued pleasure.

## II. Characters

**Jordan Baker -**

Jordan Baker is an attractive, impulsive, childhood friend of Daisy Buchanan. She is the first person to bring up the subject of Gatsby to Nick Carraway. She also relates the sad story of his relationship with Daisy and Daisy's doomed marriage to the philandering Tom Buchanan. While intrigued by her good looks, Nick recalls that he saw her picture in photos of the sporting life at Asheville, Hot Springs, and Palm Beach in connection with a "critical, unpleasant story." The reader later discovers this concerns a time she cheated in a major golf tournament. Her insincerity with Nick in their love affair is another example of her detached personality. When she first appears in the novel, she is lounging on a sofa with Daisy "as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire," like two princesses in an unreal world. Both women use and dispose of people, as Gatsby and Nick experience firsthand. In Fitzgerald's long line of sensual, modern flapper characters, Jordan is one of the most well-known. There is an amoral aura about her, and her world revolves around herself and false material values. Jordan is distinguished from Daisy in her hard, unsentimental view of romance.

**Daisy Buchanan -**

Daisy Buchanan is one of the true "Golden Girls" of Fitzgerald's stories, the wealthy, hard-to get debutante. In this book, she is the love interest of Jay Gatsby, who builds his mansion for her, and views her East Egg home from the point of its green light. She is the cousin of Nick Carraway, and was brought up in Louisville society. She was the young love of Gatsby when he was a soldier. He does not see her after he is called to battle overseas. During the interim, she meets Tom Buchanan and marries him. At first happy in this marriage, she later discovers that Tom is having affairs. She withdraws into a dream world, yet never loses interest in the illusion of her love with Gatsby. Daisy flirts with him and entertaining his obsessive interest until she commits murder and he takes the rap. Then, she hides behind the protection of her husband, a cruel brute, who uses and abuses people. Moreover, Daisy's voice is the voice of money, as Nick discovers. Her whole careless world revolves around this illusion: that money makes everything beautiful, even if it is not. The danger is, like Gatsby, she carries the "well-forgotten dreams from age to age." Her spiritual lightness parallels her material wealth, and she hides behind Tom when Gatsby is in danger.

**Tom Buchanan -**

Tom Buchanan is the villain of this novel and has Nazi-like theories of race. Nick knew him from Yale and describes him as "one of the most powerful ends that ever played football" there. From an "enormously wealthy" family, he brings a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest, Illinois, to the East. He and Daisy spend a year in France and "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together," before ending up in East Egg. After college, Tom changes and becomes, the writer notes, a blond thirty-year-old with a "rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner." He tells Nick that, based on a book Tom has read and obviously reveres, "The Rise of the Colored Empires," civilization is "going to pieces" and that the white race will be "submerged." Nick observes that Tom and Daisy belonged to a "secret society" that ruined, through their insensitivity and carelessness,  other peoples' lives. Tom is demeaning to George Wilson, his mistress's husband, who owns a garage in the wasteland between New York and East Egg. He also mistreats Myrtle herself, whom he violently hits in front of her sister and Nick when she mentions Daisy's name. The overall impression the reader has of this character is his physical power and brute strength. He is a fairly one-dimensional figure in this sense. Tom is indirectly responsible for Gatsby's death because he uses Wilson's hatred and jealousy against Gatsby in making Wilson believe that Myrtle was Gatsby's mistress.

**Nick Carraway -**

The character of Nick Carraway functions prominently in this novel. He is a transplanted Mid-westerner who buys a house in West Egg and sells bonds on Wall Street in New York City. Young and attractive, Nick becomes friends with Jordan Baker at a dinner party, where he is reunited with his cousin, Daisy. Nick, who claims to be the only honest person he knows, succumbs to the lavish recklessness of his neighbors and the knowledge of the secret moral entanglements that comprise their essentially hollow lives. While he is physically attracted to Jordan, he recognizes her basic dishonesty and inability to commit to a relationship. He muses on the loss of his innocence and youth when he is with her on his thirtieth birthday and sees himself driving on a road "toward death through the cooling twilight." Lacking the romantic vision of Gatsby, Nick sees life now as it is. Nick deduces that Gatsby is both a racketeer and an incurable romantic, whose ill-gotten wealth has been acquired solely to gain prominence in the sophisticated, moneyed world of Daisy's circle.

Nick is the moral center of the book. From his perspective, we see the characters misbehave or behave admirably. In keeping with Nick's code of conduct, inherited from his father, we learn from the very beginning of the novel that he is "inclined to reserve all judgments" about people because whenever he feels compelled to criticize someone he remembers "that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." His father also told him, prophetically, that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth." At the novel's end, most readers find that Nick is more akin to Gatsby than to any other character in the book. Insofar as Gatsby represents the simplicity of heart Fitzgerald associated with the Midwest, he is really a great man. His ignorance of his real greatness and misunderstanding of his notoriety endear him to Nick, who tells him he is better than the "whole rotten bunch put together."

**Jay Gatsby -**

One of the most fascinating figures in American literary history, Jay Gatsby is a self-created personage, the embodiment of the American Dream. As Nick discovers, Gatsby's parents were poor farmers, whom he had never accepted as his parents. "The truth was that Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." He developed out of an idealization of the American Dream, and the Golden Girl who personified that. One day, while attending a small Lutheran college in southern Minnesota and feeling dismayed by having to work as a janitor to put himself through school, Gatsby spots the moored yacht of Dan Cody. In an action that changes the young boy's life, Cody welcomes him aboard his yacht and introduces him to fine living. Gatsby becomes the protege of the wealthy goldminer and lives with him until Cody dies. With some wealth of his own and dreams of more, he goes into the army. His fate is truly sealed when he meets the most popular girl in the Alabama town near his army post. She becomes the embodiment of the American Dream for him instantly, and from that moment they fall in love and he is determined to have the girl named Daisy. He becomes impressed with her beautiful home and many boyfriends. Perhaps attracted to her material value, she becomes his sole reason for being. When he considers his penniless state, he vows never to lose her in that way again, for while he is called to fight and is away at war, she marries a wealthy Midwesterner named Tom Buchanan. Gatsby commits himself to "the following of a grail" in his pursuit of her and what she represents. This obsession is characteristic of a dreamer like Gatsby, who loses a sense of reality but rather believes in "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing."

Jay Gatsby successfully completes his military obligation and attends Oxford afterwards. He then returns to America and becomes involved in a drug ring. In his criminal affairs, he quickly gains wealth. The next time he sees Daisy, however, she is married to Tom Buchanan and lives on Long Island. To be close to her, Gatsby buys a mansion across the bay and gives extravagant parties in the hopes that Daisy will come to one. He discovers that Nick is a distant cousin of Daisy and gets Nick to take him to see her.

Gatsby's parties are vulgar, in spite of his polite manners, and he lacks a sense of security despite the outward manifestation of his ego. Nevertheless, his loyalty to his dream and idealism mark him as one of the tragic heroes in American literature.  
  
**Mr. Klipspringer -**

Mr. Klipspringer is a hanger-on, who lives off Gatsby by boarding at his mansion. He does liver exercises on the floor when Nick tours with Daisy and Gatsby. A "dishevelled man in pajamas," he gives nothing back to Gatsby. Gatsby compliments Klipspringer, or Ewing, as he calls him, for his piano playing of popular songs. One of these features the lines: "One thing's sure and nothing's surer/The rich get richer and the poor get children/Ain't we got fun?" As most of the characters' names in Fitzgerald's stories, Klipspringer resonates as the name of someone who jumps around and "clips" or robs people of something.

**Owl Eyes -**

This minor character illuminates the character of Jay Gatsby. He finds that the books in Gatsby's library are real, even though the pages are uncut. Like the books, Gatsby is the real thing, but unformed, unlettered, and for all his financial cunning, ignorant.

Furthermore, the ocular imagery in the book is enhanced by this character's role since various acquaintances of the mysterious Gatsby lend their truth to his real story.

George Wilson

George Wilson feels henpecked by his wife Myrtle. A victim of circumstance, he has a poor life and can only work to make a living and must ask the man who is having an affair with his wife, Tom Buchanan, for a car with which to move away. Full of anger and frustration about his wife's disloyalty, Wilson acts on his impulses and kills someone who is just as much a victim of the Buchanans as he. According to Nick, "he was a blonde, spiritless man, anemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us … hope sprang into his light blue eyes." He is a true product of the wasteland between the suburban world of wealth and New York City.

**Myrtle Wilson -**

Myrtle Wilson is the mistress of Tom Buchanan and wife of George Wilson, men representing distinctly separate classes on the social spectrum. Myrtle clearly aspires to a life of wealth with Tom, who humors her with gifts: a puppy, clothes, and various personal items. Nick describes her as a stout woman in her mid-30s, who carries "her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can." She has a vitality and ignores her husband "as if he were a ghost" when Tom appears. She is another one of Tom's victims since he physically hits her in the face at her mention of Daisy's name, and is murdered by a speeding car she thinks belongs to Tom, as she rushes out to greet it.

**Meyer Wolfsheim -**

Meyer Wolfsheim is one of Jay Gatsby's underworld contacts in bootlegging and racketeering. Fitzgerald based this character on a real gangster who fixed the 1919 World Series, Arnold Rothstein. We see Wolfsheim at the Metropole and in dark settings. One of Wolfsheim's notable characteristics is his wearing of cufflinks made of human molars. He is so selfish and insecure that he refuses to attend Gatsby's funeral. Nick sees the gangster part of Gatsby's life as one of the ways he made his money, but he separates Gatsby's character from true insensitive, subhuman criminals like Wolfsheim. Gatsby stands by Daisy when she commits a crime, but Wolfsheim will not honor his relationships.

**III. Themes**

**Culture Clash -**

By juxtaposing characters from the West and East in America in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was making some moral observations about the people who live there. Those in the Midwest—the newly arrived Nick Carraway—were fair, relatively innocent, unsophisticated, while those who lived in the East for some time—Tom and Daisy Buchanan—were unfair, corrupt, and materialistic. The Westerners who moved East, furthermore, brought the violence of the Old West days to their new lives. Fitzgerald romanticizes the Midwest, since it is where the idealistic Jay Gatz was born and to where the morally enlightened Nick returns. It serves metaphorically as a condition of the heart, of going home to a moral existence rooted in basic, conservative values. Further, the houses of East Egg and West Egg represent similar moral differences. The East is where Daisy and Tom live, and the West is where Gatsby and Nick live. Fitzgerald refers to the West as the green breast of a new world, a reflection of a man's dream, an America subsumed in this image. The materialism of the East creates the tragedy of destruction, dishonesty, and fear. No values exist in such an environment.

**American Dream -**

Gatsby represents the American dream of self-made wealth and happiness, the spirit of youth and resourcefulness, and the ability to make something of one's self despite one's origins. He achieved more than his parents had and felt he was pursuing a perfect dream, Daisy, who for him embodied the elements of success. Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody, was the ultimate self-made man who influenced Gatsby in his tender, impressionable youth. When Gatsby found he could not win Daisy's love, he pursued the American Dream in the guise of Cody. Inherent in this dream, however, was the possibility  of giving in to temptation and to corrupt getrich-quick schemes like bootlegging and gambling. Fitzgerald's book mirrors the headiness, ambition, despair, and disillusionment of America in the 1920s: its ideals lost behind the trappings of class and material success.

Examples of the American Dream gone awry are plentiful in *The Great Gatsby:* Meyer Wolfsheim's enterprising ways to make money are criminal; Jordan Baker's attempts at sporting fame lead her to cheating; and the Buchanans' thirst for the good life victimizes others to the point of murder. Only Gatsby, who was relatively unselfish in his life, and whose primary flaw was a naive idealism, could be construed as fulfilling the author's vision of the American Dream. Throughout the novel are many references to his tendency to dream, but in fact, his world rests insecurely on a fairy's wing. On the flip side of the American Dream, then, is a naivete and a susceptibility to evil and poor-intentioned people.

**Appearances and Reality -**

Since there is no real love between Gatsby and Daisy, in *The Great Gatsby*, there is no real truth to Gatsby's vision. Hand in hand with this idea is the appearances and reality theme. Fitzgerald displays what critics have termed an ability to see the face behind the mask. Thus, behind the expensive parties, Gatsby is a lonely man. Though hundreds had come to his mansion, hardly anyone came to his funeral. Owl Eyes, Mr. Klipspringer, and the long list of partygoers simply use Gatsby for their pleasures. Gatsby himself is a put-on, with his "Oggsford" accent, fine clothes, and "old boy" routine; behind this facade is a man who is involved in racketeering. Gatsby’s greatness lies in his capacity for illusion. Had he seen Daisy for what she was, he could not have loved her with such singleminded devotion. He tries to recapture Daisy, and for a time it looks as though he will succeed. But he must fail, because of his inability to separate the ideal from the real. The famous verbal exchange between Nick and Gatsby typifies this: concerning his behavior with Daisy, Nick tells him he can't repeat the past. "Can't repeat the past," Gatsby replies, "Why of course you can!"

**Moral Corruption**

The wealthy class is morally corrupt in *The Great Gatsby*, and the objective correlative (a term coined by poet and critic T. S. Eliot that refers to an object that takes on greater significance and comes to symbolize the mood and world of a literary work) in this case is the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, which preside over the valley of ashheaps near Wilson's garage. There are no spiritual values in a place where money reigns: the traditional ideas of God and Religion are dead here, and the American dream is direly corrupted. This is no place for Nick, who is honest. He is the kind of person who says he is one of the few honest people he's ever met, and one who is let down by the world of excess and indulgence. His mark of sanity is to leave the wasteland environment to return home in the West. In a similar manner, T. S. Eliot's renowned poem "The Wasteland" describes the decline of Western civilization and its lack of spirituality through the objective correlative (defining image) of the wasteland.

**IV. Style  
  
Point of View -**

*The Great Gatsby* is told from the point of view of Nick Carraway, one of the main characters. The technique is similar to that used by British novelist Joseph Conrad, one of Fitzgerald's literary influences, and shows how Nick feels about the characters. Superbly chosen by the author, Nick is a romantic, moralist, and judge who gives the reader retrospective flashbacks that fill us in on the life of Gatsby and then flash forward to foreshadow his tragedy. Nick must be the kind of person whom others trust. Nick undergoes a transformation himself because of his observations about experiences surrounding the mysterious figure of Jay Gatsby. Through this first-person ("I") narrative technique, we also gain insight into the author's perspective. Nick is voicing much of Fitzgerald's own sentiments about life. One is quite simply that "you can never judge a book by its cover" and often times a person's worth is difficult to find at first. Out of the various impressions we have of these characters, we can agree with Nick's final estimation that Gatsby is worth the whole "rotten bunch of them put together."

**Setting -**

As in all of Fitzgerald's stories, the setting is a crucial part of *The Great Gatsby.* West and East are two opposing poles of values: one is pure and idealistic, and the other is corrupt and materialistic. The Western states, including the Midwest, represent decency and the basic ethical principles of honesty, while the East is full of deceit. The difference between East and West Egg is a similar contrast in cultures. The way the characters line up morally correlates with their geographical choice of lifestyle. The Buchanans began life in the West but gravitated to the East and stayed there. Gatsby did as well, though only to follow Daisy and to watch her house across the bay. His utter simplicity and naivete indicates an idealism that has not been lost. Nick remains the moral center of the book and returns home to the Midwest. To him, the land is "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that." He finds that he is unadaptable to life in the East. The memory of the East haunts him once he returns home. Another setting of importance is the wasteland of ash heaps, between New York City and Long Island, where the mechanization of modern life destroys all the past values. Nick's view of the modern world is that God is dead, and man makes a valley of ashes; he corrupts ecology, corrupts the American Dream and desecrates it. The only Godlike image in this deathlike existence are the eyes of Dr. J. L. Eckleburg on a billboard advertising glasses.

**Satire -**

Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a satire, a criticism of society's foibles through humor. The elements of satire in the book include the depiction of the *nouveau riche* ("newly rich"), the sense of vulgarity of the people, the parties intended to draw Daisy over, the grotesque quality of the name "Great" Gatsby in the title. Satire originated in the Roman times, and similarly criticized the rich thugs with no values, tapped into cultural pessimism, and gave readers a glimpse into chaos. *The Great Gatsby* is the tale of the irresponsible rich. Originally, the title of the book was "Trimalchio," based on an ancient satire of a man called Trimalchio who dresses up to be rich.

**Light/Dark Imagery -**

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author uses light imagery to point out idealism and illusion. The green light that shines off Daisy's dock is one example. Gatsby sees it as his dream, away from his humble beginnings, towards a successful future with the girl of his desire. Daisy and Jordan are in an aura of whiteness like angels—which they are not, of course, yet everything in Gatsby's vision that is associated with Daisy is bright. Her chatter with Jordan is described as "cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes" by Nick. The lamp light in the house is "bright on [Tom's] boots and dull on the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair." Gatsby comments to Daisy and Nick how the light catches the front of his house and makes it look splendid, and Nick notes how Daisy's brass buttons on her dress "gleamed in the sunlight." Between the frequent mention of moonlight, twilight, and the women's white gowns, Fitzgerald alludes to the dreamlike qualities of Gatsby's world, and indirectly, to Nick's romantic vision. On the other hand, Meyer Wolfsheim, the gambler, is seen in a restaurant hidden in a dark cellar when Gatsby first introduces him to Nick. "Blinking away the brightness of the street, my eyes picked him out obscurely in the anteroom," says Nick.