The Great Gatsby

By F. Scott Fitzgerald

Original book jacket: Celestial Eyes by Francis Cugat
Section 1: Background

- “The Great American Novel”
- F. Scott Fitzgerald
- Modernism
- Historical Context
“The Great American Novel”

- Term coined in an essay by John William De Forest in 1868 (Klein)
- Capturing the essence of America
- Perennial nerdy debate

The Great Gatsby

- The most read novel in American high schools. ("High School Reading Books")
- American society and values
- Transitional work into Modernism
F. Scott Fitzgerald

Best known for his novels depicting the flamboyance and excess of the Jazz Age

• Born (1896) into a middle-class family in Minnesota but grows up mostly in New York State

• After a failed romance with a Chicago socialite, Fitzgerald drops out of Princeton and joins the US Army (WWI).

• Proposes to Zelda Sayre. She rejects his proposal but later agrees after the success of *This Side of Paradise* (1920).

• Spends time in Europe with modernist writers and artists of the "Lost Generation."
F. Scott Fitzgerald

• 1925: *The Great Gatsby* receives positive reviews from critics but fails commercially.

• Zelda suffers a nervous breakdown and is committed to a mental health institution.

• Fitzgerald struggles professionally and financially; moves to Hollywood hoping to find success as a screenwriter.

• Overcomes alcoholism only to die of a heart attack (1940).

• *The Great Gatsby* and his other works gain increased attention during and following WWII.
It is often helpful to think of literary works as part of a larger movement.

**Romanticism** (circa 1790) characterized by a rejection of the rational and an emphasis on individual experience, expression, emotion, and imagination. Often includes the supernatural.

**Realism** (circa 1865) a reaction to the fanciful escapes of Romanticism. Realists sought to develop a style that valued the faithful portrayal of everyday experiences and common people.

**Modernism** (circa 1900) A reaction to WWI and increased industrialization. Attempts to capture the alienation, cultural disruption, and loneliness of living in a society of rapid and even traumatic change. ("Literary Movements")
Historical Context:

- WWI and Consequences
- “The Roaring Twenties”
- Industry and Technology
- Urbanization
- The Standard of Living
- Social Change
- Prohibition
WWI and Consequences

- 1914 - 1918
- 30 nations declare war
- Industrial and chemical “advances”
- 16 million deaths
- Nightmare-inducing images and films (carpet bombings, trench warfare, chemical weapons victims, etc.)
- A “lost generation” of the traumatized and disillusioned

French soldiers attack German trenches with gas and flamethrowers.
“The Roaring Twenties”

- Also known as...
  Les Années Folles "crazy years"
  The Jazz Age

- Dynamic social, cultural, and artistic change in Western society

- A break with tradition and an emphasis of the modern
Industry and Technology

Technological advances from WWI production continue into the 1920s.

New products and increased production (often via assembly lines)

- Cinema
- Telephones
- Radio (and sports broadcasts)
- Affordable cars
- Appliances (Perc-o-toaster!)
- Medicine
Urbanization

• 1920: For the first time, most Americans live in a city.

• City dwellers see comparatively greater improvements in wealth and standard of living. (Little)

• Culture war: rural traditionalists vs. urban modernists (Zeitz)
The Standard of Living

• Rising earnings
• Low unemployment
• Higher stock valuations
• Disposable income
• New patterns of leisure and consumption
• NOTE: This prosperity was NOT ENJOYED EQUALLY!
Social Change

African Americans

• The New Negro Movement
• Harlem Renaissance
• Great Migration

“The New Woman”

• The 19th Amendment ratified in 1920
• Social expectations and norms
  • “Flappers”
  • Gender roles
  • Independence
Prohibition

• Nationwide ban on alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933

• Protestants, Progressives, and women exert political pressure leading to the 18th Amendment.

• Accidentally gives rise to robust organized crime networks
  • Bootleggers, mobsters, gin mills, speakeasies, hooch parlors, gangsters, Tommy guns, etc.

• Ended by the 21st Amendment
Section II: Novel Preview

• Content Warning
• Setting
• Main Characters
• Plot
• Themes
CONTENT WARNING!

- Alcohol abuse
- Violence and death
- Sexuality
- Sexism
  - Subjugation
  - Objectification
- Racism (toward people of African descent)
  - Prejudiced stereotypes
  - Discarded terminology
- Antisemitism (hatred of ethnic Jews)
  - Prejudiced stereotypes
  - Slurs
Setting

- Long Island, New York
- The neighboring towns of West Egg and East Egg
- Not far from New York City
- Most of the events occur in Long Island mansions and fancy Manhattan apartments.
Main Characters:

Nick Carraway
New in town

Daisy Buchanan
Magnetic personality

Tom Buchanan
Strength and status

Jordan Baker
Playing the game

Jay Gatsby
So mysterious
Plot (beginning)

Nick Carraway moves to the NYC area to pursue a career in finance (stocks and bonds).

Nick renews his friendship with an old college classmate, Tom. Coincidentally, Tom is married to Nick’s cousin, Daisy.

Nick becomes intrigued by his mysterious new neighbor, Gatsby.
The Great Gatsby

**Theme Subjects:**

- Class in America
- Ambition
- Obsession
- Wealth and excess
- Morality (right and wrong)
- Living in the past
Section III: Learning Goals

• Reading Schedule
• Key Literary Elements
• Final Task
# Reading Schedule:

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Key Literary Elements:

- Point of View
- Characterization
- Symbolism
- Imagery
- Sentence Style
- Foreshadowing
Point of View

Nick Carraway looks back to when he moved to New York to start his career. He tells the story of *The Great Gatsby* in the past tense and describes the events as he sees them.

• Pay attention to what he emphasizes and what he glosses over.

• Note his tone (attitude) toward different subjects.
Characterization

We will analyze how Fitzgerald creates some of literature’s most iconic characters and uses them to develop his themes.

Helpful terms:

Character traits: Elements of personality such as intelligence, dishonesty, or charm.

Motivation: The reasons behind a character’s thoughts and actions.

Foil characters: Characters that the author positions to encourage comparison. This often emphasizes the differences.
Symbolism

Fitzgerald imbues specific objects, locations, and events with added layers of meaning.

Not every item in the novel is symbolic. However, none of the descriptions or inclusions are accidental.

Insider tip! Pay special attention when the novel describes a falling clock.
Imagery

Descriptions that allow the reader to imagine with the senses.

“The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall.” (Fitzgerald 11)
Sentence Style

Fitzgerald’s sentences are often flowing, poetic, complex, nuanced, and unpredictable.

“The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath—already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the center of a group and then excited with triumph glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.” (44-5)
Sentence Style

He may start with one idea and take unexpected turns within a single sentence.

The disjointed ideas and ambiguous meanings are part of modernism. Just go with it.

“Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering.” (39)
Foreshadowing (providing clues about what may happen) is a structural device that adds tension and anticipation.

Pay attention to any hints that Fitzgerald provides.

“No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.” (2)
Final Task

How will you demonstrate your mastery?

You will be analyzing Fitzgerald's development of one important theme in the novel.

Theme development analysis might discuss...

- Symbolism
- Characterization
- Conflict / plot
- Point of view
- Related themes
Final Task

Wanna cheat? Pick a theme subject NOW and take notes as you read.

- Obsession
- Identity
- Class in America
- Entitlement
- Consumerism
- Love / romance
- God

- Carelessness
- Wealth / poverty
- Morality / immorality
- Ambition
- Women and men
- Isolation
- Ostentation (showing off)

- The past / memory
- Honesty
- Death / loss
- Friendship
- Narcissism
- Youth
- Pleasure
Takeaways

• Life in and around New York City in the 1920s

• A simple plot that revolves around five central characters.

• Be prepared for complex and obscure language that you may not understand at first glance.

• Pay attention to Fitzgerald’s messages about life (themes).


