

The Great Gatsby Seminar Packet

1. What is important about the title of *The Great Gatsby*?
2. What are the conflicts in *The Great Gatsby*? What types of conflicts—physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional—figure in this novel? Are they resolved?
3. Why is Gatsby unable to put the past behind him? Why does he demand that Daisy renounce her former love for her husband?
4. What choice would you have made in Daisy's situation?
5. What role does Daisy play in Gatsby's downfall?
6. How is alcohol used in the novel?
7. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from the perspective of Nick, a friend of Gatsby?
8. How is class depicted in the novel? What point is the author trying to make?
9. What does the green light represent?
10. Why does the author call our attention to the billboard advertising Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, an optometrist? What is the meaning of the vacant eyes that watch the characters?
11. Is Gatsby consistent in his actions? Why did he change his name? Do you ever find him fake or contrived? Is he a fully developed character?
12. Do you consider Gatsby to be a "self-made man"? Is he a good portrayal of achieving the American Dream?
13. Do you find the characters likable? Would you want to meet them?
14. Did the novel end the way you expected?
15. How essential is the setting? Could the story have taken place anywhere else or at any other time?
16. What do you think the lavish parties at Gatsby's mansion were meant to represent? What is the author trying to say about American culture?
17. What is the role of women in *The Great Gatsby*? Is love relevant? Are relationships meaningful?
18. What do you think about Daisy's assessment that women must be pretty but unintelligent if they want to be happy? What in her life led her to this conclusion?
19. Why is *The Great Gatsby* controversial? Why has it been banned/challenged?
20. How does religion figure into the novel? How would the novel be different if religion or spirituality played a more prominent role in the text?
21. How does *The Great Gatsby* relate to current society? How well did it represent the Jazz Age (society and literature) at the time it was published?
22. Is the novel still relevant?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1. Jay Gatsby effectively overturned the dated assumption that gangsters were lowlife from the Bowery and replaced it with an upscale figure who was enviable wealth and stylish. Fitzgerald understood that since the advent of Prohibition, gangsters were, in fact, on the rise. (Pauly)
2. Nearly every early twentieth-century American social bias is represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. We see such bias in narrator Nick Carraway's ruminations on class and on women, in the rumors of criminality surrounding the newly rich Jay Gatsby, and, most explicitly, in the racism, classism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant sentiment espoused by Tom Buchanan, whose wealth, race, and gender position him as the voice of the dominant ideology. (Froehlich)
3. For both Tom and Nick, racial miscegenation and immigrant ethnic assimilation provide models of identity formation and upward mobility more easily comprehensible than the amalgam of commerce, love, and ambition underlying Gatsby's rise. (Goldsmith).
4. The object of Nick's critique, American capitalism and its production of an upper class bound by no ethical law, is present from the beginning. (Coleman)
5. *The Great Gatsby* is an exploration of the American Dream as it exists in a corrupt period, and it is an attempt to determine that concealed boundary that divides the reality from the illusions. The illusions seem more real than reality itself. Embodied in the subordinate characters in the novel, they threaten to invade the whole of the picture.

SETTING-

1. Gatsby is unable to reconcile with the heightened genteel world of the East, unable also to fulfill an idealized image of self in the crassly material world of Tom Buchanan. The material undoing and the conflict between East and West become major themes in the novel. (Lehan)
2. West Egg is to New York what Las Vegas is now to Los Angeles--a place to drift without purpose, to fill what would otherwise be empty time. (Lehan)
3. One first notes that *The Great Gatsby* is built around East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes, all of which are characterized in terms of light. A fourth setting, New York,

appears less vividly in terms of light, although a harsh sun often gleams there. The perdurance of light imagery establishes *The Great Gatsby* as a “novel about seeing and misseeing”. (Seiters)

NICK-

1. However, it is not only Jay Gatsby's romantic tendencies that threaten modernity; his biographer's distorted picture of New York and the Midwest, the new world and the old, offers a fractured account of his time. (Barrett)
2. This ambivalence in his character undermines his statements about himself as being one of the few honest people that he has ever known and has led to many critics considering him a kind of smug voyeur. (Hermanson)
3. Against all logic, Nick finds himself attracted to Gatsby. He listens to Gatsby's preposterous autobiography with first incredulity, then fascination, and finally belief. He wants to believe Gatsby, wants to believe that this roughneck, this proprietor of the elaborate road house next door is a person of consequence. If Gatsby is the *great* Gatsby, it is because Nick thinks he is...(Gross).
4. But what of Carraway himself? He is guilty neither of the amoral cruelty of the Buchanan set--like him or not, he does possess some capacity for relationship--nor of Gatsby's delusion that man can simultaneously ignore and conquer history through a platonic self-creation derived from and modeled on that very same history and culture. (Callahan).
5. At times, Nick's character behaves in a fashion that diverges from the norms he valorizes as narrator, i.e. his desire for the “golden armed Jordan”, his enchantment with Gatsby's parties, and his preoccupation with Daisy's voice. This contradiction in no way detracts from Nick's narratorial reliability; rather, it affirms the homodiegetic narrator's unique position “within and without”, both succumbing to the lure of the American Dream and recognizing later the Nightmare lurking under its golden surface. (Preston)
6. Not only does Nick adopt this romanticized ideal of women, but he also seems to accept the hostility toward women this romanticization conceals, making no comment about Daisy's bruised knuckle. How conveniently Nick adopts the voice of the objective reporter “inclined to reserve all judgments”when dealing with Tom's abuse her and later, when Nick informs us of Tom's hitting Myrtle with equanimity. While Tom's freedom with money is “a matter for reproach” Tom's freedom with his fists elicits no condemnation. (Preston)

GATSBY-

1. Gatsby's naturally that of the hero of romance. The everyday is unreal to him; reality is what he has discovered through his dreams. (Parker)
2. Jay Gatsby, a figure marked by failure and shadowed by death throughout most of the novel, nevertheless achieves a form of "greatness" in the final paragraphs of his story. For it is in the final, lyrical paragraphs of the novel that Gatsby's fate takes on mythic dimensions, becoming an allegory for the course of the American nation and for the struggles and dreams of its citizens. (Will)
3. In defiance of the class difference separating them, he aspires high to this girl in a golder tower, the "king's" daughter, whose voice is full of money. Gatsby does not seem to realize that his idea of Daisy, whom he weds with a kiss one summer night has as little bearing on reality as Jay Gatsby does. (Hermanson)
4. FitzGerald set out to create a character who was slightly larger than life, (what critics would later call "mythic" in nature), who lived or felt with an intensity that separated him from others, who did not fully understand the complexity of his own being, and who would be seen by a narrator who was trying to make sense out of such monomania and to draw a moral lesson from it that might have application, on a lower frequency, to his own sense of life. (Lehan)
5. Gatsby had no residual values to give his life direction except the values he created in inventing himself--and these were marred by the serious conflict between his essential self and accidental self and by a world devoid of the romantic sense of good, the beauty and truth that incarnated and hence justified the intensity of his vision. (Lehan)
6. Jimmy Gatz/Jay Gatsby confuses the values of love with the buying power of money. He is sure that with money he can do anything-even repeat the past. Despite his prodigious faith in money, Gatsby does not know how it works in society and cannot comprehend the arrogance of the rich who have been rich for generations.

DAISY-

1. Fitzgerald's Daisy is both a flower of innocence with the power to rescue Nick (and by implication Gatsby as well) from a commodified world and a kind of cultural monster who betrays her creator's Romantic female ideal
2. It is Daisy Fay who becomes the incarnation of his (Gatsby's) romantic idea: Daisy five years married to Tom Buchanan; Daisy, who lacks maturity, intrinsic worth, or solidity of character. And why should she be better than the world of which she is a part? It is Gatsby who endows with a meaning that she could in no way embody. (Lehan)
3. For Gatsby, born on the margins, Daisy Fay is the embodiment of both success and the unknown; her privileged social status renders her a mysterious cynosure of sexual attraction, wealth, and social belonging, and when he kisses her she becomes the incarnation of his dreams and "unutterable visions". (Giltrow)
4. Despite her facile cynicism and claim to sophistication, Daisy is still the "nice" girl who grew up in Louisville in a beautiful house with a wicker settee. She has assimilated the urbane ethic of the East which allows a bored wife a casual discreet affair. But she cannot, like Gatsby's uninvited guests, wink at the illegal and the criminal" (Ornstein)
5. At the same time, Daisy's cynical acceptance of Tom's flirtation adds an ugliness to his adultery that is less immediate when we see him alone with Myrtle or Daisy. (Coleman).
6. Once Daisy comes to understand the source of Gatsby's money, her interest in him is gone forever. Gatsby never realizes how tenuous his relationship with Daisy really is, how much it depends not just on money but the right kind of money. (Lehan).

TOM BUCHANAN-

1. The idea of power in *The Great Gatsby* is embodied in Tom Buchanan. He is not only a man of powerful build and commanding presence, but he exudes a kind of authority as he ushers people about as well as forcing moral pronouncements on them. (Lehan).
2. It takes no forcing whatever to see how Gatsby and Tom play into these Spenglerian ideas: the story of Gatsby is the story of the Faustian man, while Tom Buchanan embodies the rise of the new-moneyed Caesar who has come to power after Enlightenment science has transformed the mind.
3. Money, legally and illegally obtained dominates the text, and ultimately carries the final authority of textual meaning. To that extent Tom becomes a central presence in the novel, an arbiter of final value... When Nick reveals the name of the firm for which he works, Tom dismisses it out of hand: "Never heard of them". And, it is, of course, Tom who turns the novel around by merely telling Daisy the origins of Gatsby's money.

MYRTLE WILSON-

1. Married to the pallid proprietor of a gas station in the ash-heaps, Myrtle must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class. Her smoldering sensuality enables her to attract Tom Buchanan, and in the small apartment on West 158th Street that Tom rents as a place of assignation, she pitifully attempts to put on airs. But what Myrtle buys and plans to buy during the Sunday party in Chapter Two tellingly reveals her status. She aims for extravagance, but has had no experience with it.
2. Reminders of Myrtle's unfortunate position as Tom's mistress and victim are required to prevent her from becoming a merely comic figure.
3. The message in all these cases would seem to be that if you have the right background, you can get away with murder. In *Gatsby* itself, the two characters who fall in love above their station pay with their lives for their presumption, while Tom and Daisy assuage any discomfort they may feel over cold chicken and ale. It is a double standard with a vengeance.
4. The connection between Myrtle and the dog as creatures to be kept under restraint is underlined by the collar she plans to buy, and by the expensive leather-and-silver leash her husband discovers on her bureau, arousing his suspicions. During Nick's final meeting with Tom, Fitzgerald twice evokes the dog comparison. (Donaldson).

SYMBOLS-

1. The monstrous eyes (of Eckleburg) are the novel's major symbol. The book's chief characters are bound, and they behave blindly. (Samuels)
2. Everything in the book is symbolic, from Gatsby's eratz mansion to the wild and aimless parties which he has there, yet everything seems so "true to life" that some critics continue to see the novel primarily as a recreation of the '20s. (Samuels)
3. *The Great Gatsby* was one of the very first novels to depict the vacuousness of the new commercial culture. Except for Gatsby's godlike sense of the potentiality of self, God has withdrawn from this world and is replaced by the commercial billboard with the blind eyes of T.J Eckleburg. (Lehan)
4. Always a characterizing device in *The Great Gatsby*, the car soon develops into a symbol of death. (Seiters).
5. The "foul dust" symbolizes the valley of ashes, a vast dead valley that bursts geographical barriers to include both Eggs as well New York and, by extension, the United States.