

The Great Gatsby



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

F. Scott Fitzgerald grew up in Minnesota, attended a few private schools (where his performance was mediocre), and went to Princeton University. In 1917, Princeton put Fitzgerald on academic probation. He enlisted in the Army. On base in Alabama in 1918, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, who refused to marry him unless he could support her. He returned to New York to pursue fame and fortune. The publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, in 1920, made Fitzgerald a literary star. He married Zelda one week later. In 1924, the couple moved to Paris, where Fitzgerald began work on *The Great Gatsby*. Though now considered his masterpiece, the novel sold only modestly. The Fitzgeralds returned to the United States in 1927. Fitzgerald published several more novels, including *Tender is the Night* (1933), but none matched the success of his first. Deep in debt because of their ritzy lifestyle, the Fitzgeralds began to spiral into alcoholism and mental illness. Fitzgerald died of a heart attack on December 21, 1940. Zelda died eight years later in a fire.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age" to refer to the period more commonly known as the Roaring Twenties. Jazz is an American style of music marked by its complex and exuberant mix of rhythms and tonalities. *The Great Gatsby* portrays a similarly complex mix of emotions and themes that reflect the turbulence of the times. Fresh off the nightmare of World War I, Americans were enjoying the fruits of an economic boom and a renewed sense of possibility. But in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald stresses the darker side of the Roaring Twenties, its undercurrent of corruption and its desperate, empty decadence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Modernist fiction attempted to represent the sense of emptiness and disillusionment that dominated Europe and the United States after World War I. In this way, *Gatsby* can be considered as related to such modernist works as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). But *The Great Gatsby* and all of Fitzgerald's works are best compared to those written by other Americans such as Ernest Hemingway, members of the "Lost Generation" of American writers who moved to Europe after World War I. All these writers depicted the reality, corruption, and sadness of the human condition, but Fitzgerald most effectively portrayed

the American cultural moment he called the "Jazz Age."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Great Gatsby*
- **Where Written:** Paris and the US, in 1924
- **When Published:** 1925
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Long Island, Queens, and Manhattan, New York in the summer of 1922
- **Climax:** The showdown between Gatsby and Tom over Daisy
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Puttin' on the Fitz. Fitzgerald spent most of his adult life in debt, often relying on loans from his publisher, and even his editor, Maxwell Perkins, in order to pay the bills. The money he made from his novels could not support the high-flying cosmopolitan life his wife desired, so Fitzgerald turned to more lucrative short story writing for magazines like *Esquire*. Fitzgerald spent his final three years writing screenplays in Hollywood.

Another Failed Screenwriter. Fitzgerald was an alcoholic and his wife Zelda suffered from serious mental illness. In the final years of their marriage as their debts piled up, Zelda stayed in a series of mental institutions on the East coast while Fitzgerald tried, and largely failed, to make money writing movie scripts in Hollywood.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the summer of 1922, Nick Carraway moves from Minnesota to work as a bond salesman in New York. Nick rents a house in West Egg, a suburb of New York on Long Island full of the "new rich" who have made their fortunes too recently to have built strong social connections. Nick graduated from Yale and has connections in East Egg, a town where the people with social connections and "old" money live. One night Nick drives to East Egg to have dinner with his cousin, Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan, a classmate of Nick's at Yale. There, he meets Jordan Baker, a beautiful and cynical professional golfer. Jordan tells Nick that Tom is having an affair. Upon returning home from dinner, Nick sees his mysterious neighbor Jay Gatsby holding out his arms toward the Long Island Sound. Nick looks out across the water, but sees only a **green light** blinking at the end

of a dock on the far shore.

A few days later, Tom invites Nick to a party in New York City. On the way, Tom picks up his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, the wife of George Wilson, the owner of an auto shop in an industrial area between West Egg and New York City called the **Valley of Ashes**. At the party, Myrtle gets drunk and makes fun of Daisy. Tom punches her and breaks her nose.

Nick also attends one of Gatsby's extravagant Saturday night parties. He runs into Jordan there, and meets Gatsby for the first time. Gatsby privately tells Jordan a story she describes as the most "amazing thing." After going to lunch with Gatsby and a shady business partner of Gatsby's named Meyer Wolfsheim, Nick meets with Jordan and learns the "amazing" story: Gatsby met and fell in love with Daisy before World War I, and bought his West Egg **mansion** just to be near her and impress her. At Gatsby's request, Nick arranges a meeting between Gatsby and Daisy. The two soon rediscover their love.

Daisy invites Nick and Gatsby to lunch with her, Tom, and Jordan. During the lunch, Tom realizes Daisy and Gatsby are having an affair. He insists they all go to New York City. As soon as they gather at the Plaza Hotel, though, Tom and Gatsby get into an argument about Daisy. Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy never loved Tom and has only ever loved him. But Daisy can only admit that she loved them both, and Gatsby is stunned. Tom then reveals that Gatsby made his fortune by bootlegging alcohol and other illegal means. Tom then dismissively tells Daisy to go home with Gatsby, since he knows Gatsby won't "bother" her anymore. They leave in Gatsby's car, while Tom, Nick, and Jordan follow sometime later.

As they drive home, Tom, Nick, and Jordan come upon an accident: Myrtle has been hit and killed by a car. Tom realizes that it must have been Gatsby's car that struck Myrtle, and he curses Gatsby as a coward for driving off. But Nick learns from Gatsby later that night that Daisy was actually behind the wheel.

George Wilson, distraught, is convinced that the driver of the car yellow car that hit Myrtle is also her lover. While at work that day, Nick fights on the phone with Jordan. In the afternoon, Nick has a kind of premonition and finds Gatsby shot to death in his pool. Wilson's dead body is a few yards away. Nick organizes a funeral, but none of the people who were supposedly Gatsby's friends come. Only Gatsby's father and one other man attend.

Nick and Jordan end their relationship. Nick runs into Tom soon after, and learns that Tom told Wilson that Gatsby had run over Myrtle. Nick doesn't tell Tom that Daisy was at the wheel. Disgusted with the corrupt emptiness of life on the East Coast, Nick moves back to Minnesota. But the night before he leaves he walks down to Gatsby's beach and looks out over Long Island Sound. He thinks about Gatsby, and compares him to the first settlers to America. Like Gatsby, Nick says, all people must

move forward with their arms outstretched toward the future, like boats traveling upstream against the current of the past.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jay Gatsby – Nick's wealthy neighbor in West Egg. Gatsby owns a gigantic mansion and has become well known for hosting large parties every Saturday night. Gatsby's lust for wealth stems from his desire to win back the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan, whom he met and fell in love with while in military training in Louisville, Kentucky before WW I. Gatsby is a self-made man (his birth name was James Gatz) who achieved the American Dream of rising up from the lower classes to the top of society. But to Gatsby, the desire for love proves more powerful than the lust for money. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby's downfall as a critique of the reckless indulgence of Roaring Twenties America.

Nick Carraway – A young man from Minnesota who has come to New York after graduating Yale and fighting in World War I. Nick is the neighbor of Jay Gatsby and the cousin of Daisy Buchanan. The narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick describes himself as "one of the few honest people that [he has] ever known." Nick views himself as a man of "infinite hope" who can see the best side of everyone he encountered. Nick sees past the veneer of Gatsby's wealth and is the only character in the novel who truly cares about Gatsby. In watching Gatsby's story unfold, Nick becomes a critic of the Roaring Twenties excess and carelessness that carries on all around him.

Daisy Buchanan – The love of Jay Gatsby's life, the cousin of Nick Carraway, and the wife of Tom Buchanan. She grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, where she met and fell in love with Gatsby. She describes herself as "sophisticated" and says the best thing a girl can be is a "beautiful little fool," which makes it unsurprising that she lacks conviction and sincerity, and values material things over all else. Yet Daisy isn't just a shallow gold digger. She's more tragic: a loving woman who has been corrupted by greed. She chooses the comfort and security of money over real love, but she does so knowingly. Daisy's tragedy conveys the alarming extent to which the lust for money captivated Americans during the Roaring Twenties.

Jordan Baker – A friend of Daisy's who becomes Nick's girlfriend. A successful pro golfer, Jordan is beautiful and pleasant, but does not inspire Nick to feel much more than a "tender curiosity" for her. Perhaps this is because Baker is "incurably dishonest" and cheats at golf. Still, there is some suggestion in the novel that she loves Nick, and that he misjudges her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tom Buchanan – A former football player and Yale graduate

who marries Daisy Buchanan. The oldest son of an extremely wealthy and successful "old money" family, Tom has a veneer of gentlemanly manners that barely veils a self-centered, sexist, racist, violent ogre of a man beneath.

Myrtle Wilson – The wife of George Wilson and the mistress of Tom Buchanan. Myrtle disdains her beaten down husband and desperately wants to improve her lot in life. She chooses Tom as the means to this end, but he sees her as little more than an object.

George Wilson – The husband of Myrtle Wilson and the owner of an auto garage in the Valley of Ashes. Wilson is a beaten-down man, who nevertheless loves and adores his wife. Her affair with Tom drives Wilson to the edge, and her death pushes him over.

Meyer Wolfsheim – Gatsby's business partner and friend. A small, fifty-year-old Jewish man with hairy nostrils and beady eyes, Wolfsheim is a gambler who made his name in organized crime by fixing the 1919 World Series.

Owl Eyes – A drunken man Nick encounters looking through Gatsby's vast library, amazed at the "realism" of all the unread novels.

Ewing Klipspringer – A man who is such a frequent guest at Gatsby's mansion that he almost seems to live there. Yet he turns out to be nothing more than a leech, and after Gatsby's death cares only about retrieving a pair of sneakers he left at Gatsby's mansion.

Dan Cody – Jay Gatsby's first mentor and best friend. Cody left Gatsby twenty-five thousand dollars when he died, but Gatsby never received it due to a legal complication.

Henry Gatz – Jay Gatsby's father. A dignified but poor man, Henry Gatz loves his son deeply and believes he was destined for great things.

Pammy Buchanan – Daisy and Tom Buchanan's young daughter.

Michaelis – A young Greek man who runs a coffee shop near Wilson's garage.

Catherine – Myrtle Wilson's sister.

that America enjoyed in the 1920s, which was also known as the Roaring Twenties. After World War I ended in 1918, the United States and much of the rest of the world experienced an enormous economic expansion. The surging economy turned the 1920s into a time of easy money, hard drinking (despite the Prohibition amendment to the Constitution), and lavish parties. Though the 1920s were a time of great optimism, Fitzgerald portrays the much bleaker side of the revelry by focusing on its indulgence, hypocrisy, shallow recklessness, and its perilous—even fatal—consequences.



THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream—that hard work can lead one from rags to riches—has been a core facet of American identity since its inception. Settlers came west to America from Europe seeking wealth and freedom. The pioneers headed west for the same reason. *The Great Gatsby* shows the tide turning east, as hordes flock to New York City seeking stock market fortunes. *The Great Gatsby* portrays this shift as a symbol of the American Dream's corruption. It's no longer a vision of building a life; it's just about getting rich.

Gatsby symbolizes both the corrupted Dream and the original uncorrupted Dream. He sees wealth as the solution to his problems, pursues money via shady schemes, and reinvents himself so much that he becomes hollow, disconnected from his past. Yet Gatsby's corrupt dream of wealth is motivated by an incorruptible love for Daisy. Gatsby's failure does not prove the folly of the American Dream—rather it proves the folly of short-cutting that dream by allowing corruption and materialism to prevail over hard work, integrity, and real love. And the dream of love that remains at Gatsby's core condemns nearly every other character in the novel, all of whom are empty beyond just their lust for money.



CLASS (OLD MONEY, NEW MONEY, NO MONEY)

The Great Gatsby portrays three different social classes: "old money" (Tom and Daisy Buchanan); "new money" (Gatsby); and a class that might be called "no money" (George and Myrtle Wilson). "Old money" families have fortunes dating from the 19th century or before, have built up powerful and influential social connections, and tend to hide their wealth and superiority behind a veneer of civility. The "new money" class made their fortunes in the 1920s boom and therefore have no social connections and tend to overcompensate for this lack with lavish displays of wealth.

The Great Gatsby shows the newly developing class rivalry between "old" and "new" money in the struggle between Gatsby and Tom over Daisy. As usual, the "no money" class gets overlooked by the struggle at the top, leaving middle and lower class people like George Wilson forgotten or ignored.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE ROARING TWENTIES

F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age" to describe the decade of decadence and prosperity



PAST AND FUTURE

Nick and Gatsby are continually troubled by time—the past haunts Gatsby and the future weighs down on Nick. When Nick tells Gatsby that you can't repeat the past, Gatsby says "Why of course you can!" Gatsby has dedicated his entire life to recapturing a golden, perfect past with Daisy. Gatsby believes that money can recreate the past. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby as "overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves." But Gatsby mixes up "youth and mystery" with history; he thinks a single glorious month of love with Daisy can compete with the years and experiences she has shared with Tom. Just as "new money" is money without social connection, Gatsby's connection to Daisy exists outside of history.

Nick's fear of the future foreshadows the economic bust that plunged the country into depression and ended the Roaring Twenties in 1929. The day Gatsby and Tom argue at the Plaza Hotel, Nick suddenly realizes that it's his thirtieth birthday. He thinks of the new decade before him as a "portentous menacing road," and clearly sees in the struggle between old and new money the end of an era and the destruction of both types of wealth.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE GREEN LIGHT AND THE COLOR GREEN

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is the symbol of Gatsby's hopes and dreams. It represents everything that haunts and beckons Gatsby: the physical and emotional distance between him and Daisy, the gap between the past and the present, the promises of the future, and the powerful lure of that other green stuff he craves—money. In fact, the color green pops up everywhere in *The Great Gatsby*. Long Island sound is "green"; George Wilson's haggard tired face is "green" in the sunlight; Michaelis describes the car that kills Myrtle Wilson as "light green" (though it's yellow); Gatsby's perfect lawn is green; and the New World that Nick imagines Dutch explorers first stumbling upon is a "fresh, green breast." The symbolism of green throughout the novel is as variable and contradictory as the many definitions of "green" and the many uses of money—"new," "natural," "innocent," "naive," and "uncontaminated"; but also "rotten," "gullible," "nauseous," and "sickly."



THE EYES OF DOCTOR T. J. ECKLEBURG

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg on the billboard overlooking the Valley of Ashes represent many things at once: to Nick they seem to symbolize the haunting waste of the past, which lingers on though it is irretrievably vanished, much like Dr. Eckleburg's medical practice. The eyes can also be linked to Gatsby, whose own eyes, once described as "vacant," often stare out, blankly keeping "vigil" (a word Fitzgerald applies to both Dr. Eckleburg's eyes and Gatsby's) over Long Island sound and the green light. To George Wilson, Dr. Eckleburg's eyes are the eyes of God, which he says see everything.



THE VALLEY OF ASHES

An area halfway between New York City and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes is an industrial wasteland covered in ash and soot. If New York City represents all the "mystery and beauty in the world," and West Egg represents the people who have gotten rich off the roaring economy of the Roaring Twenties, the Valley of Ashes stands for the dismal ruin of the people caught in between.



EAST AND WEST

Nick describes the novel as a book about Westerners, a "story of the West." Tom, Daisy, Jordan, Gatsby, and Nick all hail from places other than the East. The romanticized American idea of going West to seek and make one's fortune on the frontier turned on its ear in the 1920's stock boom; now those seeking their fortune headed back East to cash in. But while *Gatsby* suggests there was a kind of honor in the hard work of making a fortune and building a life on the frontier, the quest for money in the East is nothing more than that: a hollow quest for money. The split between the eastern and western regions of the United States is mirrored in *Gatsby* by the divide between East Egg and West Egg: once again the West is the frontier of people making their fortunes, but these "Westerners" are as hollow and corrupt inside as the "Easterners."



GATSBY'S MANSION

Gatsby's mansion symbolizes two broader themes of the novel. First, it represents the grandness and emptiness of the 1920s boom: Gatsby justifies living in it all alone by filling the house weekly with "celebrated people." Second, the house is the physical symbol of Gatsby's love for Daisy. Gatsby used his "new money" to create a place that he thought rivaled the houses of the "old money" that had taken her away.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Great Gatsby* published in 2004.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis



In the novel's opening lines, Nick Carraway recounts this important piece of counsel from his father. He presents himself as a character who is simultaneously privileged and empathetic.

This statement establishes, first, the high socioeconomic status enjoyed by most of the protagonists in the novel. Though Nick is far from the wealthiest character, his ties to old money and academic pedigree as a Yale graduate bring him into contact with the elite of both West and East Egg. Yet this line also immediately creates a level of distance from those elite: Nick is aware of his position and actively seeks to treat those from all walks of life with respect. He thus establishes himself as not only an accepting character, but also a relatively impartial narrator.

Fitzgerald gives us, then, a character who is both inside and outside of this privileged social sphere. At times he is fully enamored by the culture, while at others he points out the flaws in its decadence. The implication here, after all, is that many others with similar "advantages" as Nick are far more critical of those who hail from different social backgrounds. The more accommodating perspective that will pervade the novel, this line implies, comes from an early piece of "advice" from Nick's father—indicating that his views are shaped by key developmental experiences.

☞ "And I hope she'll be a fool — that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."

Related Characters: Daisy Buchanan (speaker), Pammy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis


Daisy reflects while Nick visits her on her relatively despondent state of mind. As an example, she tells the story of her daughter's birth, during which she exclaimed this disconcerting wish for the child.


This passage gives excellent insight into Daisy's character and relationship with Tom. Her desperation at the moment of her daughter's birth was partly caused by his absence—which is characteristic of his generally selfish and neglectful nature. Yet Daisy's hope for her daughter is, intriguingly, not that she has a supportive husband or can take care of herself. Rather, she wishes her to be a "fool": someone who is too simple or ignorant to correctly perceive what is happening around them. The implication, here, is that Daisy wishes she herself could be a fool, for it would allow her to enjoy the luxuries of Tom's life without being aware of his unfaithful behavior or the hollowness behind the extravagance.

Fitzgerald thus presents Daisy as not only confined by Tom but also by her own conceptions of what it means to be a woman and a wife. She is, rather ironically, herself a fool for not having realized how narrowly she defines a good female identity. The passage shows how Fitzgerald perceived gender roles to have functioned in the American twenties: men, in his account, saw themselves as bread-winners expected to be chasing the American Dream, while women like Daisy and her daughter were told to be no more than "a beautiful little fool."

☞ He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, 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 a dock.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis


Nick observes, for the first time, Gatsby's odd nighttime ritual: He looks out at a green light across the water.


The "green light" is undoubtedly the most famous symbol from Fitzgerald's novel, and it has been interpreted in a vast number of ways—from an indication of his love for Daisy to a model for the roaring-twenties aspirations of Americans. Part of that ambiguity comes from the writing itself: Nick describes the action as "curious" and dilutes its certainty with the phrase "could have sworn"—as opposed to simply saying "he was trembling." The phrase "that might have been" to describe the location of the light plays a similar mystifying role. Thus the text places several layers of uncertainty between the reader and Gatsby, which mirrors Nick's experience in the moment.

Despite these uncertainties, however, it is evident that the "green light" represents some kind of aspiration for Gatsby. That it is "single" stresses the directness of the goal, for Gatsby is not gazing at a general area but rather at a fixed and unique point. As it lies "seaward" and at the "end of a dock," we can infer already that water symbolically separates Gatsby from the goal—and that crossing that water will allow him to access it.

●● My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this middle-western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today. [...] Instead of being the warm center of the world the middle-west now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go east and learn the bond business.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, narrator Nick Carraway gives this brief insight into his family history. While many of the characters in the novel can be clearly categorized as coming from old money (Daisy and Tom

Buchanan), new money (Gatsby), or essentially no money (Myrtle and George Wilson), Nick is a little more difficult to place. Given that Nick and Daisy are cousins, Nick has at least some ties to old money, and he emphasizes that his family definitely has status out West. But it's also significant that Nick's father works for a living—usually a hallmark of *new* money—rather than simply living off of an inheritance. And, what's more, the family business is the wholesale hardware business, which is fairly unglamorous.

It's fitting that Nick doesn't neatly fall into either of the old money or new money categories—he's somewhat in the middle—because it echoes the way that he acts as a middle man between Daisy and Gatsby throughout much of the novel. Indeed, Nick bridges the gap between Daisy's old money world and Gatsby's new money, but he also more literally helps get the two former lovers together again, such as when he invites Daisy over for tea so that she can reconnect with Gatsby, Nick's next-door neighbor.

This passage also introduces the recurring motif of the East and West. Around this time, Americans greatly romanticized the idea of going West to strike it rich. And as Nick's own family exemplifies, Westerners during the 1920s tended to earn their money through hard, honest work rather than riding on the coattails of family status or inheritance. But after the stock boom in the 1920s, Westerners then began migrating back East to cash in on their fortunes and try to make even more money. In other words, going West was associated with earning one's fortunes through hard work, while going East was associated with gluttonously chasing after more and more money. Nick speaks to this trend when he admits his desire to go East and learn the bond business rather than stay in the West and run the family business.

●● Her husband, among various physical accomplishments, had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven—a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax. [...] They had spent a year in France, for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together. This was a permanent move, said Daisy over the telephone, but I didn't believe it—I had no sight into Daisy's heart but I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Nick introduces Daisy Buchanan's husband, Tom. Nick frames Tom as something of a has-been: someone who achieved tremendous success in his past but now can't seem to move on from the glory days of his youth. This passage implies that Tom's "various physical accomplishments"—such as his success on the Yale football team—gave his life a strong sense of purpose and direction in his youth. Now, in adulthood, he "drift[s] here and there unrestfully" with his wife in tow and is "forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game."


The language that Nick uses to explain Tom's penchant for living in the past is significant. For one thing, in using the word "unrestfully," Nick implies that living in the past is uncomfortable and can sap people of their joy or peace in the present. In other words, if living in the past is "unrestful," then living in the present moment is implied to be restful and satisfying. Nick also emphasizes that living in the past is unproductive because the past is "irrecoverable"—the past already happened, and it's gone, so trying to recover that past state is actually impossible. Being too consumed with the past can trap a person "forever," too—as the novel will go on to show, Jay Gatsby's longtime love for Tom's wife, Daisy, is a clear example of this, because he's never able to shake his obsession with their past relationship.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ This is a Valley of Ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Nick begins the second chapter by ruminating on the Valley of Ashes between West Egg and New York City. Though his descriptions are evocative, they refer to a relatively decrepit and downtrodden region.



Fitzgerald accomplishes this effect by using a set of semi-sarcastic words and uncanny images. The nouns in the area "farm," "ridges," "hills," "gardens," "houses," and "chimneys" all would seem to describe a normal rural environment—yet all these characteristic signs of civilization are composed of dust instead of actual materials. This Valley, then is "fantastic" only in that the dust has entirely replaced the physical environment. That the "ashes grow like wheat" indicates that debris has replaced actual agricultural production, while the constitution of the men as themselves in the form of ashes dehumanizes them and makes them the mere result of the smog.

The imagery speaks to both the squalor caused by the roaring twenties culture and the relative blindness of many Americans to those effects: the dust in the valley is the direct result of New York industry—and of the wish to outsource unsightly waste. The "impenetrable cloud" and "obscure operations" stresses how that outsourcing has allowed those with money to entirely ignore the effects of their exploits. This passage is thus a condemnation of the social and economic practices in the novel. Fitzgerald implies that people may travel through the Valley between West Egg and New York City, but they relate to its environment only as various combinations of undifferentiated dust.

☛☛ But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces one of the novel's central symbols: the billboard of an eye doctor named Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which towers over the Valley of Ashes. Although the giant billboard's eyes have a few different layers of symbolic significance throughout the novel, in this passage Nick associates them with remnants of the past. He reasons that the eye doctor must have once constructed the billboard to drum up new clients, but that the doctor's medical practice is now a thing of the past—either Doctor T. J. Eckleburg “sank down himself into eternal blindness” (likely meaning that he died) or he closed up shop and moved away. Regardless of what happened to the doctor and his business, the billboard—a symbol of the medical practice that once was—still remains.

This is similar to the way that Gatsby clings to his former relationship with Daisy. At this point in the novel, their relationship is also a thing of the past, but Gatsby clings to memories and reminders of that relationship, such as the glittering green light on the end of the Buchanans' dock. Just like the billboard gestures to something that used to exist but no longer does, Gatsby clings to a relationship that no longer exists.

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When Nick meets Gatsby for the first time, he observes the

psychological power of the man's smile. Instead of describing its physical characteristics, he focuses on how effectively it brings confidence to those who perceive it.


Nick begins the account with a cliché—“smiled understandingly”—but then quickly modifies it to more precisely articulate the effect. The implication is that ordinary phrases are insufficient to describe Gatsby's magnetic effect, and thus a more precise commentary must be provided. His smile is able to provide “eternal reassurance” because it addresses a context beyond the person to which it is directed. That it has already examined “the whole external world” implies that Gatsby's smile is elevated by his extensive travels, connections, and reflections. The viewer feels “irresistible prejudice” because he has been selected above that “external world” to receive validation and “reassurance.”

Yet this effect, Nick subtly implies, is not the result of Gatsby actually confiding great confidence in his interlocutor, but rather comes from a precise performance. This doubt comes, first, from how Nick corrects “faced” with “seemed to face,” and second from the series of qualifying clauses on understanding, belief, and assurance. Each of these takes an unusual form, in which the smile does not convey the thoughts or emotions of Gatsby but rather conforms to the desires of the viewer—of which Gatsby would presumably not be aware. Fitzgerald indicates that Gatsby has perfected a way to respond to others that makes them feel entirely known and meaningful. Thus both Gatsby and those he smiles at become fundamentally empty: Gatsby for putting on a performance, but others for so desperately wanting to be understood, believed in, and assured.

●● On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nick attends one of Gatsby's lavish parties for the first time and takes in the opulence of the scene. Gatsby's parties embody the characteristics—and especially the vices—of the 1920s, when the book was set. The 1920s (also known as the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties) were financially prosperous, materially decadent, and—behind closed doors—morally loose.

The sheer amount of food and drink at this party points to the enormous economic expansion that the U.S. experienced following the end of World War I in 1918. Gatsby's own easy money—seen through the buffet tables laden with delicacies—is symbolic of the surging economy at the time. Nick also pays particular attention to the food's aesthetic qualities, such as the salads' "harlequin designs" (meaning they have a colorful pattern) and the meats that have been "bewitched to a dark gold." With these descriptions, Nick frames the food as material goods dressed up in rich colors and precious metals, which speaks to the material opulence of the 1920s.

With the economy booming, consumerism surged as well. This was the dark side of the surging economy: people become consumed by consumerism, obsessively and indulgently pursuing material goods. This passage subtly makes this critique through the words "bewitched" and "harlequin." While the word bewitched typically means "enchanted or delighted," it's used in this passage to mean "to cast a spell over." The pigs and turkeys are "bewitched to a dark gold," meaning that that they look so exquisite that they're practically enchanted, as if the chef put a spell on them to roast them to such a perfect golden brown. Importantly, "bewitched" has negative connotations—its synonyms are words like "possessed," "cursed," or "hexed." So the use of the word "bewitched" here—along with the reference to gold, a precious metal—seems to suggest that people in the 1920s are "bewitched" by consumerism and indulgence.

The word "harlequin" implies a similar critique. While "harlequin" used as an adjective refers to a colorful diamond pattern, as a noun it refers to a jester or a joker in traditional pantomime, who was always dressed in a diamond-patterned costume—in other words, the jester was dressed in "harlequin designs" just like the salads on Gatsby's buffets. In literature, a jester or fool figure is often one who seems ridiculous and unserious but actually is a clear source of truth and couches their sharp social criticisms in jokes. (A clear example of this is Feste in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.) Given this context, Fitzgerald's use of the word "harlequin" may suggest that the sumptuous world of

Gatsby's parties, and the 1920s more generally, are deserving of sharp criticism and commentary from a Feste-type figure who can point out how ridiculous everyone and everything really is.

Lastly, this passage also points to how common drinking was during the 1920s, despite Prohibition (which banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933). That Gatsby's bar is outfitted with many different types of alcohol gestures to the thriving illegal liquor trade during the time (and, of course, the indulgence that characterized the 1920s more generally). That many of these particular spirits have been "so long forgotten" is likely a reference to the fact that Prohibition has been dragging on for four years at the time in which the story is set.

●● On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas. A stout, middle-aged man with enormous owl-eyed spectacles was sitting somewhat drunk on the edge of a great table, staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books. As we entered he wheeled excitedly around [...].

"[...] They're real!"

"The books?"



He nodded.


"Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you."

[...]

"See!" he cried triumphantly. "It's a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism!"

Related Characters: Owl Eyes, Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby, Jordan Baker

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick and Jordan Baker wander around Gatsby's party in search of Gatsby himself—this is Nick's first time attending one of Gatsby's parties, and despite living next door, Nick has never met the man. Instead, though, they find an excitable, drunken man in Gatsby's library, chattering animatedly about the fact that Gatsby's books are real rather than being cardboard dummies of book spines. This passage draws on several of the novel's key themes.

As with all of Nick's descriptions of Gatsby's party and mansion, this excerpt about the library "panelled with carved English oak" points to the material decadence the 1920s. And that Nick surmises that the wood panels were "probably transported complete from some ruin overseas" suggests that, whether or not Gatsby's wood-paneled walls were imported, Gatsby could easily afford such a thing.

Owl Eyes compares Gatsby to David Belasco, an American playwright, director, and impresario in the early 20th century. He was known for using stage lighting and special effects to create realism and naturalism—this is why Owl Eyes connects Gatsby, with his library full of real books, to a realist like Belasco. Owl Eye's assumption that the books would be fake seems like commentary on the 1920s more generally—that is, that things look better than they actually are during this time. Owl Eye's sheer wonder at Gatsby's book collection implies that in the 1920s, everyone and everything is a sham, much like a cardboard dummy of a book spine: good looking on the outside, empty on the inside. Ironically, this is true of Gatsby, as readers will soon find out. His entire persona as Jay Gatsby is carefully curated to obscure his real origins.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

As Nick and Gatsby drive into the city, Gatsby gives this brief (and somewhat suspicious) backstory of his life. Gatsby firmly positions himself as being from old money—and having not just the inherited wealth but also the prestigious education, sophistication, heritage, and traditions to match. Each of these things, the novel implies, is just as important to being considered authentically "old money" as the wealth itself. So in this passage, Gatsby is attempting to underscore his credibility—but his "sideways" glance at Nick and hurried speech seem to undermine that very credibility.

As the novel will go on to show, people who come from old money (like Tom Buchanan) have little respect for those who earned, rather than inherited, their fortunes. Gatsby wants desperately to be respected and admired, which requires him to seem like old money. However, his shady behavior in this passage (including what seems like an all-too-convenient assertion that his entire family is dead) begins to suggest that Gatsby is not from old money at all. Throughout the novel, Nick doesn't harbor the same animosity towards new-money folks as characters like Tom Buchanan do, so his growing apprehension about Gatsby in this passage isn't about the wealth divide—it's about the simple fact that Gatsby seems untruthful and rehearsed. This is what paints Gatsby as "a little sinister" to Nick, a feeling that he shrugs off throughout the book.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ "I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition."

He looked at me sideways—and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. He hurried the phrase "educated at Oxford," or swallowed it or choked on it as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces and I wondered if there wasn't something a little sinister about him after all.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby (speaker), Jordan Baker

“Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he’s a gambler.” Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: “He’s the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919.”

“Fixed the World’s Series?” I repeated.

The idea staggered me. I remembered of course that the World’s Series had been fixed in 1919 but if I had thought of it at all I would have thought of it as a thing that merely HAPPENED, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe.

“How did he happen to do that?” I asked after a minute.

“He just saw the opportunity.”

“Why isn’t he in jail?”

“They can’t get him, old sport. He’s a smart man.”

Related Characters: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby (speaker), Meyer Wolfsheim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nick is astounded to learn that the eccentric man he just met was the notorious gambler Meyer Wolfsheim whom Gatsby knows personally. Over the course of this day with Gatsby, Nick has been getting the creeping suspicion that there’s something “a little sinister” about Gatsby and that he’s not who he says he is. In this scene, the fact that Gatsby personally knows Wolfsheim, casually glosses over his criminal acts surrounding the World Series, and praises him as a “smart man” for evading punishment deepens Nick’s unease, because it aligns Gatsby with the world of crime and unchecked power.

Gatsby’s connection with a gambler like Meyer Wolfsheim also complicates the binary between old money and new money. While it sometimes seems to Nick that there are only two paths to wealth (one can earn it or inherit it), it’s also possible to become wealthy through crime or manipulation. Nick has never really considered the existence of the criminal path, which he reveals when he admits that the fixed World Series seemed to him to be “a thing that merely HAPPENED,” rather than something that someone did for personal gain. But meeting Wolfsheim in

the flesh forces Nick to confront the idea that these kinds of shady people actually exist—and that Gatsby might be one of them. It’s through characters like Wolfsheim that the novel portrays the American Dream as no longer about building a satisfying life but rather about accruing more and more wealth, no matter the cost to society. This is precisely why Gatsby calls the crime “an opportunity” and the criminal a “smart man.”


“Why didn’t he ask you to arrange a meeting?”

“He wants her to see his house,” she explained. “And your house is right next door.”

“Oh!”

Related Characters: Jordan Baker, Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis


At tea, Jordan Baker reveals to Nick what Gatsby said in private at his last party: Gatsby and Nick’s cousin Daisy Buchanan were romantically involved five years ago, and Gatsby, who’s still deeply in love with her, wants Nick to help the ex-lovers reconnect. This passage is comical for its childishness; too embarrassed to explain all of this to Nick himself, Gatsby uses Jordan as the messenger. Throughout this day, Nick has been beginning to see through the veneer of Gatsby’s carefully curated persona, and this moment adds to this. No longer seeming perfectly polished and intriguing, Gatsby now seems more like a lovesick little boy. Even Gatsby’s plan to reconnect with Daisy seems juvenile: he wants to accidentally-on-purpose bump into Daisy, and he also specifically wants to show off his big house to impress her. That Gatsby specifically wants Daisy to see his house and be impressed by it also sets up his mansion’s symbolic significance. The huge, grand home symbolizes Gatsby’s enduring love for Daisy and how desperate he is for her attention and approval.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“It makes me sad because I've never seen such — such beautiful shirts before.”

Related Characters: Daisy Buchanan (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis



On her tour of Gatsby's home, Daisy becomes distraught. Though the nature of her response is not entirely clear, it is induced by observing the extent of his new wealth.

The comment speaks first and foremost to Daisy's superficiality. Her emotional response is not triggered by anything personally significant but rather by “beautiful shirts.” Yet these shirts also represent her newfound ability to be with Gatsby, for his current wealth would have made him acceptable to her overbearing family. Thus Daisy must accept that her choice to be with Tom was not necessary as she had thought it to be—and that she could have had both Gatsby and economic security. The text poses the question, however, of how aware Daisy is of her own attraction to money. Perhaps the breakdown, in fact, represents a personal crisis, in which Daisy confronts her own superficiality: She would become, then, neither a staid example of old money, nor a new money aspirant—but rather someone who reckons with the emptiness of both pursuits.

Fitzgerald's ambiguous presentation of her character speaks to the difficulty of understanding, at this time, how Americans were relating to their roaring twenties culture. Though readers may have a good sense of our protagonist Nick's shifting perspectives, the other characters are often inscrutable both to readers and to each other. Fitzgerald, then, not only describes an ambivalence toward the culture that many may have felt but been unable to articulate, but also recreates the effect through his narrative construction.

“They were sitting at either end of the couch looking at each other as if some question had been asked or was in the air, and every vestige of embarrassment was gone. Daisy's face was smeared with tears and when I came in she jumped up and began wiping at it with her handkerchief before a mirror. But there was a change in Gatsby that was simply confounding. He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room.”

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After observing the awkwardness between Daisy and Gatsby during their reunion, Nick excuses himself—but when he returns, the energy in the room is entirely different. Daisy's tears are unexplained, but it seems that they're either from happiness over reconnecting with Gatsby after all these years or regret that she broke things off with Gatsby to marry someone else. Either way, her tears seem to suggest that she has lingering romantic feelings for Gatsby. This explains Gatsby's own dramatic shift in demeanor; he's gone from deathly nervous to coy to radiantly happy in a matter of minutes.

For most characters in the novel, the American Dream comes down to one thing: accruing wealth. And while Gatsby is most certainly focused on increasing his fortune—regardless of what it takes to do so—he's not interested in wealth for wealth's sake. Instead, Daisy is at the core of Gatsby's American Dream. He hopes that his new money will rival the old money (Tom Buchanan) that took her away, and that Daisy will leave Tom for Gatsby. Daisy's effusion of emotion in this passage signals that Gatsby is one step closer to achieving this dream, and this is why he suddenly glows and radiates joy.

“That huge place THERE?” she cried pointing.


“Do you like it?”

“I love it, but I don't see how you live there all alone.”

“I keep it always full of interesting people, night and day. People who do interesting things. Celebrated people.”

Related Characters: Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan (speaker), Nick Carraway

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After Gatsby and Daisy have tea at Nick's house, Gatsby leads them both across the lawn to his mansion, which elicits this reaction from Daisy. Even though this excerpt is pure dialogue, it's easy to imagine that Gatsby is incredibly smug; the whole reason he wanted the reunion to happen at Nick's house was so that Gatsby could impress Daisy with his own mansion next door. Daisy's awe, then, suggests that Gatsby's plan is thus far unfolding perfectly.


Daisy's concern that Gatsby might be lonely living in such a big house by himself implicitly comments on life in 1920s America. Because of the economic boom following World War I, the 1920s were financially prosperous and materially opulent; the grandeur of Gatsby's mansion clearly points to that. But Fitzgerald implies throughout the novel that this life, though dazzling on the outside, is an empty one—hence Daisy's comment that living alone in such a big house must feel empty and sad.

Of course, Gatsby is quick to rebut this, bragging that his house isn't empty but is instead “always full of interesting people, night and day. People who do interesting things. Celebrated people.” But through Nick, readers know that this isn't actually the case: Gatsby's parties certainly don't carry on all week long, so there are times when Gatsby is alone, and even when he does have a house full of people, he doesn't even know many of the guests. (His first time in attendance, Nick realized that he was one of the few people who were actually invited, and that few people he talked to knew Gatsby personally.) In claiming that his house is always bustling with interesting people, Gatsby only plays into the idea that the 1920s seemed dazzling and intoxicating but were actually quite empty.

☞ We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths—intruding into one chamber where a dishevelled man in pajamas was doing liver exercises on the floor.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Ewing Klipspringer, Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis


Following their reunion, Gatsby leads Daisy (with Nick in tow as their chaperone) through his luxurious mansion, which is next door to Nick's house. Gatsby's mansion is opulent and larger than life, which echoes the atmosphere of 1920s America. The almost sing-song sound of “dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms” emphasizes the seemingly endless number of rooms in the mansion, while details like the fresh flowers and delicate silks highlight how every inch of the place is draped in luxury. The unending opulence and luxury points to the economic boom that was going on around this time in America; for many, this surge in the economy meant easy money, rampant consumerism, and lavish lifestyles.

However, throughout *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald pulls the curtain back to reveal the unglamorous side of the time period, suggesting that it was actually empty and destructive. He hints at this here with the man in pajamas, who is Ewing Klipspringer. As the novel goes on to show, Ewing is often Gatsby's only company when he isn't hosting a party, and Ewing isn't even a close friend. At the end of the novel, it's revealed that he was only leeching off of Gatsby's wealth and didn't care about Gatsby whatsoever.

☞ He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Following their reunion, Gatsby gives Daisy a tour of his sprawling mansion, and Nick notices that Gatsby has had his eyes lovingly locked on Daisy the entire time. Jordan Baker made it clear to Nick earlier that Gatsby specifically wanted Daisy to see his house—presumably so she could see the lavish life that he could give her. Building up his fortune, mansion, and reputation in the past five years to ultimately show it all off to Daisy has been Gatsby's version of the American Dream. For many characters in the novel, the American Dream is simply about accruing more and more wealth for its own sake, but Gatsby is unique in that his underlying dream is to win over Daisy, and accruing wealth is largely a means to that end.

But after years of romanticizing his past relationship with Daisy and simultaneously fantasizing about future with her, Gatsby doesn't know what to do in the present moment now that Daisy is actually in his house. This fixation on the past and/or the future is true for many of the characters in the novel (later in the novel, Nick fixates on his fear of the future). Gatsby's dazed expression and near tumble down the stairs suggest that he's severely disconnected from reality; he's been living in memory and fantasy for years, which is why he struggles to connect with the real Daisy in the present.

“If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” said Gatsby. “You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock.”

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby (speaker), Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Gatsby concludes his tour of his mansion, he explains to Daisy that he can usually see a green light at the end of her dock across the bay. The green light is one of the central symbols in the novel and it represents Gatsby's longtime love for Daisy while marking her physical and emotional distance from him, given that she lives in East Egg and is married to someone else. The green light was special to Gatsby because it marked her presence; it is physically close to her—just at the end of her dock—so it pointed him to where she was. The light's proximity to his beloved is perhaps what made it feel “enchanted” to him. But now, for the first time, Gatsby himself is physically closer to Daisy than the light is. This has enormous significance, as it means that the light that he has focused on for so long is no longer a symbol of his pining for Daisy or her distance from him—now it's just a light.

In addition, as she loops her arm through his, Daisy no longer seems so unattainable to Gatsby, which the passage implies was at least part of her appeal all along. (Readers will remember Gatsby's earlier admission that when he was first dating Daisy years ago, he loved the fact that other men had loved her before him—it seems that Gatsby implicitly longs for competition when it comes to romance.) So after years of waiting and working, this moment with Daisy is an anticlimactic one for him.

As I went over to say goodbye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

After having tea with Gatsby and Daisy—their first reunion

in five years—and accompanying them on the tour of Gatsby’s mansion, Nick takes his leave and notices a peculiar look on Gatsby’s face. From what Nick can tell, Gatsby looks happy, doubtful, and disappointed all at once, which is perhaps a surprising combination of emotions for a man who has finally reconnected with the woman he’s spent half a decade longing for.

Nick realizes, though, that this pining was perhaps destructive. In fantasizing about Daisy for years, Gatsby put her on a pedestal and turned her into a dream rather than a real person—this is what Nick is referring to when he says that Gatsby “had thrown himself into [his fantasy of Daisy] with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way.” But Nick emphasizes that at some point, Gatsby’s conception of Daisy became unrecognizable or took on a life of its own—now, the real Daisy can’t possibly compete with the perfect, embellished version of her that’s lived in Gatsby’s mind for years. This, the novel implies, is one reason that living in the past or future can be so unproductive and harmful; losing oneself in memories or fantasies robs a person of their present happiness and also disconnects them from reality.

projected an ideal (“Platonic”) way his life could exist and then avidly pursued that end. Next, Nick swaps in monotheistic religion for Plato’s Greek philosophy, likening Gatsby to a self-imagined Jesus pursuing a holy end (going about “His Father’s business”). Recall that Gatsby seeks a green light that lies across the water, implying that he must walk over that water like Jesus to achieve his goal. Yet for all this spiritual talk the goal is still a “vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty”: it may be meaningful, enormous, and even aesthetically pleasing, but it is fundamentally empty.

These descriptions might seem to belittle Gatsby for entirely lacking substance, but the weight of references to Plato and God also grant him a sense of import. Nick’s tone simultaneously chastises Gatsby for conforming to the childish inventions of a “seventeen year old boy” and respects him for being “faithful to the end.” In contrast to other characters who seem to change from moment-to-moment, there is something worthy in Gatsby’s single-minded pursuit of perfecting an identity. Fitzgerald thus offers both a critical and a sympathetic eye toward the social-climbing and avarice seen in Gatsby and his twenties society. He simultaneously praises commitment and mocks cheap deception.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

As Nick recounts Gatsby’s backstory, he offers both factual information and this more abstract description. He notes how artificially Gatsby has created his personality and identity, but also seems to respect the commitment he shows to that artifice.



To better articulate the fraudulence of Gatsby’s identity, Nick employs several sets of symbols. First he describes him as a “Platonic conception of himself,” implying that Gatsby


☝☝ "I wouldn't ask too much of her," I ventured. "You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!"

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

Related Characters: Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Nick and Gatsby have this conversation after a failed party in which Gatsby tries to recreate his romance with Daisy. They disagree, pivotally, on whether it will be possible for Gatsby and Daisy to reignite their relationship.

On a literal level, Nick is simply saying that Gatsby cannot “repeat” his liaisons with Daisy, whereas Gatsby claims that he will in fact be able to do so. Yet their divergent

viewpoints speak far more broadly to two ideological positions held by Americans at the time. Gatsby is fundamentally future-oriented as a “new money” person: he believes that anything can be accomplished through an act of will, as in the way he became rich. Whereas Nick, as a representative of “old money,” is more focused on the limits of the past and more sensitive to the flaws in Gatsby’s “nouveau riche” thinking.

We can see this more critical position in his description of Gatsby’s look: it is “wild” and falsely equates time with space—assuming that he can discover “the past” in the physical richness of “his house.” Gatsby thus represents a more narrow-minded viewpoint that energy and money will be able to turn back time and manifest any desire. While Nick has certainly lauded that personal drive, he disagrees here on the feasibility of the project.

☛ For over a year he had been beating his way along the south shore of Lake Superior as a clam digger and a salmon fisher or in any other capacity that brought him food and bed. [...]

A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick gives a brief backstory of Jay Gatsby—or Jimmy Gatz, which is his real name. For all his polish and sophistication in the present, Gatsby did not come from old money; his beginnings were in fact as humble as they come. As a clam digger and salmon fisher, Jimmy began dreaming up a grandiose new life and persona for himself, and these fantasies transported him to “A universe of ineffable gaudiness.” This phrase is significant, because it’s an apt description of Gatsby’s infamous parties and his life more generally in West Egg. Stepping foot into one of Gatsby’s parties is like stepping foot into another universe, one that seems disconnected from reality (hence its “ineffab[ility],” or indescribable, heavenly quality). Likewise, stepping foot into his fantasies was a way for Jimmy to temporarily escape his reality of being a lowly fisherman. And Gatsby’s parties, like 1920s America more broadly, are


ostentatious and grand, just like his early fantasies of his future life.


☛ “I wonder where in the devil he met Daisy. By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me. They meet all kinds of crazy fish.”

[...]

Tom was evidently perturbed at Daisy’s running around alone, for on the following Saturday night he came with her to Gatsby’s party. Perhaps his presence gave the evening its peculiar quality of oppressiveness—it stands out in my memory from Gatsby’s other parties that summer. There were the same people, or at least the same sort of people, the same profusion of champagne, the same many-colored, many-keyed commotion, but I felt an unpleasantness in the air, a pervading harshness that hadn’t been there before.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway, Tom Buchanan (speaker), Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

When Gatsby somewhat combatively tells Tom that he knows Tom’s wife, Daisy, Tom is nonchalant but later gives this glimpse of his true feelings. It’s possible that Tom feels threatened by Gatsby himself (perhaps because he’s just seen Gatsby’s stunning mansion, a clear marker of Gatsby’s wealth and power), but he feels particularly threatened by Daisy’s agency. Because of this, he accompanies Daisy to Gatsby’s next party like a ball and chain, but Daisy isn’t the only one he weighs down—Tom’s mere presence is enough to shift the entire energy of the party from jovial to “oppressive[,]” “unpleasant[,]” and “harsh[.]”

This unpleasant atmosphere speaks to Tom’s controlling nature and abrasiveness more generally, but it also connects to the broader point Fitzgerald makes throughout the novel about the 1920s. While the Roaring Twenties (which Fitzgerald calls the “Jazz Age”) seem opulent and fun—much like the “profusion of champagne” and “many-colored, many-keyed commotion” that characterize a Gatsby party—this is just a façade masking an unpleasant reality. Fitzgerald suggests that underneath its shiny exterior, the 1920s were

a time of indulgence, recklessness, and shallowness.

“Who is this Gatsby anyhow?” demanded Tom suddenly.
“Some big bootlegger?”

“Where’d you hear that?” I inquired.

“I didn’t hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know.”

“Not Gatsby,” I said shortly.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway, Tom Buchanan (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

When Tom attends his first party at Gatsby’s house, he makes the assumption that Gatsby got rich selling illegal alcohol. This assumption seems dramatic, unwarranted, and cruel—but it is actually, unbeknownst to Nick, entirely correct. Tom Buchanan is from old money, and his snobbish attitude towards Gatsby (and new-money folks in general) speaks to a common attitude that pervaded the 1920s American upper crust: the idea that old money (which was inherited) was superior to new money (which was earned). While some would perhaps frame new-money folks as being hard workers and self-starters who are admirably tenacious and motivated, Tom paints them as nothing but criminals. Tom confidently declares that “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers,” which suggests that anyone with new money probably made that money illegally and immorally—a sweeping generalization that undermines the honest, hard work that many people did to earn their fortune. However, as the novel will go on to show, Tom is actually spot on about Gatsby’s shady rise to wealth, fame, and status: Gatsby is in cahoots with underhanded people like the notorious gambler Meyer Wolfsheim, and he’s willing to do just about anything to increase his fortune.

“He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: ‘I never loved you.’ After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago.

“And she doesn’t understand,” he said. “She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours—”

Related Characters: Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, Nick Carraway (speaker), Tom Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After the party that Tom attends, Gatsby sulks, knowing that Daisy didn’t have a good time and that Tom’s mere presence spoiled the evening. He feels like he’s losing Daisy all over again after recently courting her, which is why he laments, “she doesn’t understand [...] She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours—.” It’s possible that Gatsby is referring to their closeness when they were first seeing each other years ago, or he could be referring to recent times they’ve had together now that they’re having an affair. Regardless, this statement—“She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours—” is a classic one for Gatsby because it’s rooted in the past and involves pining for what he’s lost. Throughout the novel, Gatsby idealizes Daisy in his mind and focuses on his memories of her rather than loving and appreciating the real Daisy that exists in the present.



Gatsby is also preoccupied with fantasies of the future, believing that Daisy would go so far as to deny that she ever loved her husband and then live happily ever after with Gatsby instead. This fantasy is dramatic and simplistic, which makes it seem almost childish. Unable to accept that Daisy does—or at least did—genuinely love her husband, Gatsby focuses on re-creating the past when Daisy only loved him.

Chapter 7 Quotes

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly. 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.

Related Characters: Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway (speaker),

Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis



As they prepare to leave for New York City, Nick and Gatsby talk briefly about Daisy's behavior. Gatsby unexpectedly produces this perceptive comment, which calls into question his unconditional admiration for Daisy.


Both Nick and Gatsby point out that it is possible to discern Daisy's social class simply from the quality of her voice. They tie this to its musical quality with the terms "jingle" and "cymbals' song," indicating that it is a learned affectation—something she has been brought up to perform in order to give off "inexhaustible charm." Nick's surprise at the realization indicates how difficult it can be to perceive such characteristics, for they take a studious examination—but also how apparent they are when finally spoken. Fitzgerald uses this line to show how Daisy's old money has been assimilated even into her physical being.

The comment also reveals a surprising attention on Gatsby's part to Daisy's wealth. Indeed, the fact that her voice—something with which he would have always been accustomed—reveals her wealth calls into question even the validity of their older relationship. Recall, however, that Daisy earlier made a similar statement when Gatsby's shirts moved her to tears. The text indicates that both characters, then, may be interested in each other partially for their money—either for the actual financial resources equated with Gatsby's new money or for the prestige that would be associated with Daisy's old money. And, with the image of the voice, it points out the difficulty of disentangling such superficial attractions from other relations of character and identity.

☞ It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night—and, as obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113


Explanation and Analysis

After Gatsby and Daisy's affair has been going on a while, Gatsby suddenly stops hosting his famous parties. Noticing this, Nick affirms that Gatsby's "career as Trimalchio was over," referencing a character that appears in Petronius's *Satyricon* from the first century. In it, Trimalchio is a former slave who becomes extremely wealthy (through underhanded, appalling means) and is known for throwing sumptuous dinner parties to impress his guests. This, of course, aligns with Gatsby, since he, too, came from lowly roots (he was a fisherman) and engaged in shady money-making schemes to amass his fortune. And like Trimalchio, Gatsby is known for his outlandish parties. Fitzgerald himself was keen on this connection between the two men—so much so that two of his working titles for *The Great Gatsby* were *Trimalchio* and *Trimalchio in the West Egg*. Furthermore, the word "Trimalchio" is often used to refer to new-money people who flaunt their wealth and live indulgently—people exactly like Gatsby.

In *Satyricon*, the scene with Trimalchio ends with the entire household acting out Trimalchio's funeral, which also seems to foreshadow Gatsby's own death and funeral at the end of the novel.

☞ "Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." She began to sob helplessly. "I did love him once—but I loved you too."

Related Characters: Daisy Buchanan (speaker), Nick Carraway, Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

Tom Buchanan has just caught on that his wife, Daisy, is having an affair with Gatsby, and in this scene everything tumbles out into the open. Gatsby pushes Daisy to admit that she loves him and doesn't love Tom, but even that's unsatisfying for Gatsby. When he pushes Daisy to declare that she never loved Tom, Daisy objects that Gatsby "want[s] too much"—he wants Daisy to have always loved him and never loved Tom, which simply isn't true. Earlier in the novel, Nick sensed that this was what Gatsby had been fantasizing about for years; he was fixated on a past time when Daisy only had eyes for him and he was determined to re-live that past with her again one day. But as Daisy



emotionally explains in this passage, this fantasy is disconnected from reality—Daisy *does* love Gatsby, but she *did* love Tom, and it's unfair for Gatsby to demand any more from Daisy.

“She’s not leaving me!” Tom’s words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. “Certainly not for a common swindler who’d have to steal the ring he put on her finger.”

[...]

“Who are you, anyhow?” broke out Tom. “You’re one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim—that much I happen to know. I’ve made a little investigation into your affairs—and I’ll carry it further tomorrow. [...] I found out what your ‘drug stores’ were.” He turned to us and spoke rapidly. “He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him and I wasn’t far wrong.”

Related Characters: Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan (speaker), Meyer Wolfsheim, Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis


After Gatsby pushes Daisy to declare her love for him and reject her husband, Gatsby smugly announces that Daisy is leaving Tom—which Tom quickly denies. In this passage, Tom brings to light Gatsby’s shady connections and businesses in an effort to deter Daisy from him. Tom is right in saying that he “picked [Gatsby] for a bootlegger the first time [he] saw him”—soon after meeting Gatsby, Tom had asked Nick if Gatsby was “some big bootlegger” because “a lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers.” At the time, Nick had denied this, but now the evidence is irrefutable. Even Nick knows by this point that Gatsby is connected to the notorious gambler and criminal Meyer Wolfsheim.

While Gatsby had told Daisy that he made his fortune by owning several drug stores, Tom stresses that this isn’t the full truth—the real money came from illegal alcohol sales. *The Great Gatsby* is set in 1924, four years into Prohibition (when selling or consuming alcohol was illegal). Although Tom stresses the illegality of Gatsby’s actions, his speech comes off as fairly hypocritical—while Tom doesn’t sell alcohol, he *does* drink plenty of it, which suggests that he illegally buys booze and is far from morally spotless himself.

Chapter 8 Quotes

“They’re a rotten crowd,” I shouted across the lawn. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we’d been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As Nick leaves Gatsby’s house in what will be their last interaction, he yells back this redeeming comment. Though the amount of sincerity from both characters remains unclear, they do establish at least an apparent connection.

Nick’s reflection on the nature of the compliment reiterates his ambivalence toward Gatsby. He entirely disapproves of the man’s actions, finding them superficial, decadent, and morally questionable. Yet he also sees in them something that raises Gatsby above the “rotten crowd,” likely due to the way he has intensely pursued his narrative of self-creation, and thus in a way remained true to himself. Nick notably does not consider the comment to have been a flippant one, but rather observes how it has stood the test of time. A level of skepticism should be reserved, however, when Gatsby’s smile is taken into account, for we were told explicitly before how the smile creates the semblance of “ecstatic cahoots” as opposed to an actual connection. The hypothetical “as if we’d been” corroborates that interpretation and leaves Nick’s perception of Gatsby unclear until the end.

Still, Nick’s comment on the “rotten crowd” has broken with his earlier promise to be empathetic toward all. He is not judgmental, here, of those without advantages, but rather those *with* advantages. Indeed, he is the most empathetic to those without means, secondly empathetic to Gatsby’s new money, and least empathetic to Tom and his old money crowd. Fitzgerald thus shows how Nick’s sensibilities have developed from the novel’s opening pages—no longer seeking to treat all men equally but rather judging those who have behaved poorly given their social circumstances.



“You ought to go away,” I said. “It’s pretty certain they’ll trace your car.”

“Go away NOW, old sport?”

“Go to Atlantic City for a week, or up to Montreal.”

He wouldn’t consider it. He couldn’t possibly leave Daisy until he knew what she was going to do. He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn’t bear to shake him free.

Related Characters: Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway (speaker), Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Daisy and Gatsby drive home together after a disastrous day in the city, and Daisy (who was driving Gatsby’s car) accidentally strikes and kills Myrtle Wilson, who had run out into the street. Later, Nick advises Gatsby to leave town, since the authorities investigating Myrtle’s death will no doubt have a description of the car and trace it back to Gatsby, who will be blamed and tried for the murder. Nick’s advice is reasonable, and he stresses how grave this situation is, but Gatsby can’t be reasoned with—he’s too focused on whether or not Daisy will leave Tom. That Gatsby is far more concerned about his tenuous romantic future with Daisy than the very real and pressing issue of being possibly tried for murder again shows that Gatsby is deeply disconnected from reality. He dwells only in the past (and wants to re-create that past in the future), so the present feels irrelevant to him. Gatsby’s love for Daisy reads as an obsession in this passage, as he’s wildly “clutching at some last hope” even though it seems terribly unlikely at this point that Daisy will indeed leave Tom for Gatsby.

However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders. So he made the most of his time. He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand.

He might have despised himself, for he had certainly taken her under false pretenses. I don’t mean that he had traded on his phantom millions, but he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself—that he was fully able to take care of her. As a matter of fact he had no such facilities—he had no comfortable family standing behind him and he was liable at the whim of an impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick provides some background surrounding Gatsby and Daisy’s romantic relationship in their younger years, prior to Daisy’s marriage to Tom. The Gatsby that appears in this passage is dramatically different from the one that Nick has come to know over the course of his time on the West Egg. Rather than the impossibly polished party host with the stunning mansion, Gatsby is a “penniless young man without a past.” At that point, Gatsby was unable to provide for Daisy, because he had neither wealth nor the status. It’s with the idea of being able to care for Daisy, and therefore spend his life with her, that he spends the next several years building his wealth. It’s noteworthy that, in this passage, Gatsby “took her” (meaning had sex with her) “because he had no real right to touch her hand.” In other words, he couldn’t hold her hand as a suitable partner or put a ring on her finger, so he had sex with her instead. This passage, then, reveals the Gatsby’s feelings of inadequacy that go on to fuel his fortune-building and self-reinvention efforts over the next several years; he has taken Daisy in private, and he wants to have her in public, too.

Chapter 9 Quotes

●● 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.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis


After Daisy and Tom disappear, Nick gives this harsh assessment of their characters. He points out how their lifestyle and social position allowed them to wreak havoc without any significant personal consequences.


Nick's condemnation focuses on the couple's treatment of other people. That he uses the term "creatures" to refer to those people and parallels the smashing of those "creatures" with "things" stresses the way Daisy and Tom tend to objectify and belittle others. The term "people," on the other hand, is used to refer to those who "clean up the mess," once more displaying Nick's humanizing sensitivity to the less wealthy classes who would be responsible for dealing with their carelessness.

Whereas before both Nick and the reader might have maintained a level of sympathy for the events that befell the couple, here he makes evident that such sympathy is unnecessary, for the two are able to easily escape from any mayhem they have caused. Intriguingly, he does not give "money" as the sole motivation of this behavior, instead offering "vast carelessness"—a tautological formation (one whose truth is based in itself) in which they carelessly retreat into carelessness—and the enigmatic "whatever it was" as potential sources of retreat. Nick thus reiterates the inability to make sense of characters' actions that has pervaded the text thus far. We can presume it to be an economic factor or perhaps a personality deficit, but ultimately there is no way to be certain of what has motivated their selfish behavior.

●● That's my Middle West . . . the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark. . . . I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, Jordan Baker

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis



After Gatsby's funeral, Nick adopts this broader perspective on the events that have transpired in the novel. He observes that all of the characters were coastal transplants who hoped and failed to pursue an American Dream on the East Coast.


Nick offers, here, an interesting case of re-narrativizing his life: with this added realization of the characters' common heritage, he can reinterpret the tale as "a story of the West." Thus their actions and flaws become less characteristic of individual choices and more of the social types they represent. That they "possessed some deficiency" renders the plot of the novel fatalistic and pre-determined based on social constraints, while the "common" oddly binds together these Westerners even as the novel's plot has tended to highlight their differences.

The passage also speaks to a sociological shift taking place in the twenties: Whereas before the West was seen as a frontier of opportunity, at this time, a financial boom caused migration patterns to shift back eastward. Yet if the the western American Dream brought one into regions of relatively greater freedom and opportunity, those who moved east were confronting the rigid social systems epitomized by East Egg. Thus Fitzgerald has used these characters as a way to make sense of a broader pattern of movement, in which even those who were seen as wildly successful in the roaring twenties could not conform their identities fully to the nature of the older East Coast.

☛ And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world.... And as I sat there, brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out Daisy's light at the end of his dock. He had come such a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close he could hardly fail to grasp it. But what he did not know was that it was already behind him, somewhere in the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's closing passage, Nick reflects on how Gatsby's dogged pursuit of Daisy is similar to the dreams of early settlers landing on the American continent. He uses the comparison to both elevate and belittle Gatsby's character.

To introduce this idea, Nick first describes dissociating from the immediate surroundings: “the inessential houses began to melt away,” distancing him from the environment of wealth and commodities. This is a startling narrative technique, considering how Nick had earlier denied to Gatsby the potential of returning to the past: here he seems to do just that, indicating that storytelling and reflection may achieve this end far more effectively than Gatsby's purchase of a mansion on West Egg. Next, he uses this trick of time to equate the “green breast of the new world” seen by settlers in America to “Daisy's light” seen by Gatsby. In different ways, they represent an almost-reached, yet still-differed goal.


This parallel elevates Gatsby's dreams to an epic stature—for they are deemed equal in aspiration to those who have “discovered” this very land. Yet the passage also renders Gatsby less unique by pointing out how traditional and ancient his aspirations are. Nick stresses this second perspective when he observes that Gatsby's dream was “already behind him,” indicating that the destination has already been reached. This “behind” could refer to Gatsby's previous relationship with Daisy, or his hometown to the West—but also the symbolic “behind” of those Dutch sailors. Fitzgerald seems to imply that America as “the republic” already holds the aspiration that Gatsby so

desperately seeks—and that his attempts to search for fulfillment in new domains is pointless.

☛ Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And then one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In these last lines of the novel, Nick continues to offer an equivocal set of comments on his perception of Gatsby. Once more, he points out the flaws in his characteristic commitment, while simultaneously praising the way he so doggedly pursues an ideal.

To articulate this ambiguity, Nick once more summons the symbol of the “green light”—here defining it as something that can fundamentally never be obtained. Its vital quality is not actually the “orgastic future” but rather the perception of such a future that “recedes” and is “eluded.” Indeed, this is how it has symbolically functioned in the novel: never allowing the reader to pin down a singular meaning, promising to unlock the text but actually standing for a variety of conflicting allegorical ideas.

Yet it is in that very process of deferral that Nick locates the light's significance. The light is significant because it motivates those who perceive it to “run faster, stretch out our arms farther”—whether that means to perform well at one's job, or to more closely examine the symbolism of a green light. It is telling that the phrase “then one fine morning” does not end in an actual action, for it represents another of those “orgastic futures” that recedes rather than being caught. For Nick, this pursuit ends in the odd (but extremely famous) image of a set of boats futilely beating on against the current: a symbol which reiterates the wish to cross a body of water and reach the green light.

For although the boats “beat on,” they actually move “ceaselessly into the past,” indicating not only stagnancy but also a gravitational pull toward personal, social, and cultural history. Fitzgerald thus ends the novel by reversing Nick's

earlier claim that one does not repeat the past, instead asserting that though the pursuit of new dreams may indeed be worthwhile, these efforts are essentially minute compared to the natural inertia that the characters in the novel (as well as the United States itself) would experience as the roaring twenties came to a close.

☞ “Did you start him in business?” I inquired.

“Start him! I made him.”

“Oh.”

“I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter. I saw right away he was a fine appearing, gentlemanly young man, and when he told me he was an Oggsgord I knew I could use him good. I got him to join up in the American Legion and he used to stand high there. Right off he did some work for a client of mine up to Albany. We were so thick like that in everything—” He held up two bulbous fingers “—always together.”

Related Characters: Meyer Wolfsheim, Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

After Gatsby’s death, Nick visits with Meyer Wolfsheim—the notorious gambler who fixed the World Series in 1919 and who also happened to be Gatsby’s closest friend. Wolfsheim gives Nick this backstory of Gatsby, explaining that Gatsby essentially came from the “gutter.” In a way, Wolfsheim spins a classic rags-to-riches story—the idea that someone can come from humble beginnings and still manage to propel themselves to the wealthiest ranks in society. Of course, the idea of putting in hard, honest work is integral to the concept of the American Dream, and while Gatsby’s life as a bootlegger may have had its difficulties, it was far from honest. This, Fitzgerald implies, is America’s new, warped vision of the American Dream. Characters like Gatsby and Wolfsheim embody the idea that one must do whatever it takes—even if it’s immoral or illegal—to gain their wealth.

In this passage, Wolfsheim affirms that he and Gatsby were close friends, at least in the business world. When he holds

up two fingers and declares that he and Gatsby were “always together,” Fitzgerald seems to imply that the two were quite close. However, as this scene goes on, Wolfsheim refuses to attend Gatsby’s funeral, says he doesn’t show loyalty to friends in death and thus owes Gatsby nothing now, and affirms that he doesn’t want to get mixed into the drama surrounding Gatsby’s death. In other words, Wolfsheim and Gatsby may have been thick as thieves when it came to conspiring together on shady schemes, but their friendship didn’t go any deeper than that. With this, Fitzgerald makes an implicit social critique of 1920s America, suggesting that people and friendships may look glamorous, happy, or fulfilling but are ultimately empty.

☞ I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child. Then he went into the jewelry store to buy a pearl necklace—or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons—rid of my provincial squeamishness forever.

Related Characters: Nick Carraway (speaker), Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

After Gatsby’s death, Nick runs into Tom in New York City, and they have this stilted encounter. When Tom admits that he told George Wilson that Gatsby was the one who murdered Myrtle, Nick likens Tom to a child. Young children are often self-centered, unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their own actions, and they frequently make self-serving decisions. Nick suggests that Tom is no different. Of course, Tom doesn’t seem to know that it was his wife, Daisy, who was driving the car that struck and killed Myrtle, so Tom likely thinks it was Gatsby. But telling George that Gatsby is to blame was hypocritical, Nick implies, because it was Tom who was having an affair with Myrtle all that time behind George’s back. In other words, Tom sidesteps punishment for his own actions and shifts the blame onto someone else, just like an immature child would. In detailing how Tom then ducked into a jewelry store, Nick implies that it’s Tom’s wealth—coming from old money, specifically—that allows him to behave with so much recklessness, arrogance, and selfishness without punishment.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator and protagonist, begins *The Great Gatsby* by recounting a bit of advice his father taught him: don't criticize others, because most people have not enjoyed the "advantages" that he has. Nick says that as a result of following this advice, he's become a tolerant and forgiving person who resists making quick judgments of others.

For instance, Nick says that though he scorns everything Gatsby stood for, he withholds judgment entirely regarding him. Nick says Gatsby was a man of "gorgeous" personality and boundless hope. Nick views Gatsby as a victim, a man who fell prey to the "foul dust" that corrupted his dreams.

In the summer of 1922, Nick, a Yale graduate, moves from his hometown in Minnesota, where his family has lived for three generations, to live and work in New York. He has recently returned from military service in World War I, an experience that left him feeling restless in the dull **Midwest**.

Nick intends to become a bond salesman, a line of work he says that almost everyone he knew was entering. Nick hopes to find a taste of the excitement and sense of possibility that was sweeping the nation in the early 1920s. He says moving to New York offered him and everyone else the chance to discover or reinvent themselves.

Nick rents a house in West Egg, a Long Island suburb located directly across a bay from East Egg. Nick observes that the two communities differed greatly in every way but shape and size. West Egg is where the "new rich" live, people who have made their fortunes only recently and have neither the social connections nor the cultural refinement to be accepted among the "old money" families of East Egg.

The West Egg "new rich" are characterized by garish displays of wealth that the old money families find distasteful. For instance, Nick's small house (described as an "eye-sore") sits next to a mansion owned by Gatsby, a man Nick knows only by name. Gatsby's mansion is a gigantic reproduction of a French hotel, covered in ivy and surrounded by forty acres of lush lawns and gardens.

Nick's "advantages" come from "old money." Nick casts himself as someone who doesn't judge based on class, which indicates that other people do judge based on class.



Nick introduces Gatsby and connects him to both new money and the American Dream, and indicates that Gatsby was done in by the "foul dust" of the Roaring Twenties.



As a Yale graduate, Nick clearly comes from old money. His wealthy heritage has been closely tied to one place, but WW I and the 1920s upset that old order.



The 1920s boom turns the American Dream on its head. Instead of going west to build a fortune and a life, people in the 20s abandoned their roots to come east for the chance at fortune.



"Old money" East Egg faces "new money" West Egg across the water, symbolically showing the class rivalry: the towns literally oppose each other. That "old money" Nick rents a house in "new money" West Egg shows he spans both worlds.



Gatsby's mansion represents the "new money" class, which overcompensates for its lack of social connections through lavish displays of wealth. The "old money" class considers this tacky, proof of their superiority to "new money."



The main story begins when Nick, who, though he lives in West Egg has East Egg connections, drives over to East Egg to have dinner at the Buchanans. Daisy Buchanan is Nick's cousin, and Nick vaguely knew her husband Tom because Tom also attended Yale. When Nick arrives, Tom is dressed in riding clothes. Tom speaks to Nick politely but condescendingly. Nick remembers that plenty of people hated Tom at Yale, and notes that both Tom's arrogance and imposing stature have changed little since those days.

At dinner Nick meets Jordan Baker, a young professional golfer, who is beautiful but also seems constantly bored by her surroundings.

Soon, Tom launches into a diatribe about the downfall of civilization as described in a book entitled *The Rise of the Colored Empires*. The book explains that the Nordic race, with which Tom identifies himself, created civilization and is now threatened by the rise of other, inferior races. Tom urges everyone to read the book. Daisy tries to make light of his suggestion.

Just then, Tom learns he has a phone call and leaves the room. Daisy follows quickly behind, and Jordan tells Nick that the call is from Tom's mistress. The rest of dinner is awkward. As Nick is leaving, Daisy and Tom suggest he think about striking up a romance with Jordan.

Upon returning from dinner, Nick sees Jay Gatsby standing on his lawn and gazing out across Long Island sound. Nick considers calling out to Gatsby, but stops himself when he sees Gatsby extend his arms out toward the far side of the water. Nick looks across the water and sees only a tiny **green light** blinking at the end of a dock.

CHAPTER 2

Nick describes a "waste land" between West Egg and New York City where the ashes from the city are dumped. The ashes cover everything, including the men who live there. Above this bleak "**Valley of Ashes**" stare out two huge spectacled eyes from a billboard for an eye doctor's defunct practice. These haunting, unblinking **eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg** watch over everything in the Valley of Ashes.

Tom's riding clothes identify him as a member of the "old money" class: horseback riding was a hobby only of the rich who had great country estates. The more urban "new money" wouldn't ride horses. Yet Tom's stately riding clothes can't hide his hulking body, just as his politeness can't hide that he's a jerk.



Jordan's world-weary boredom shows the emptiness of "old money."



Tom's outburst shows that old money is insecure about the rise of new money, which makes old money feel as if the world was falling apart. Old money is also hypocritical, hiding hatred and corruption behind a veneer of taste and manners.



While Tom shows off his house and family and manners, he has a mistress on the side. Hypocrisy and rot are at the heart of old money in the 1920s boom.



Gatsby's gesture is symbolic of his character: he is a hopeful seeker of unattainable dreams. It's not clear at this point what the green light symbolizes, but it's clear that to Gatsby it symbolizes some dream or hope.



One day, as Tom and Nick ride a train from Long Island into the city, Tom gets off at a stop in the Valley of Ashes and tells Nick to come along. Tom leads Nick to George Wilson's auto garage, and Nick learns that Tom's mistress is Wilson's wife, Myrtle. Wilson is good-looking, but beaten-down and lifeless and has ashes in his hair, while Myrtle strikes Nick as vibrant and oddly sensuous. Tom talks with Wilson about selling a car. When Wilson goes to get some chairs, Tom whispers to Myrtle to meet them in a little while at the train station.

Tom, Myrtle, and Nick go to the apartment Tom keeps in New York City to conduct his affair. Myrtle's sister Catherine soon shows up, as does another couple. Everyone gets very drunk, including Nick. He says the party is only the second time he's been drunk.

The topic of conversation eventually turns to Nick's neighbor Gatsby. Catherine says she's afraid of Gatsby because she's heard that he's a relative of the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm, and everyone agrees that Gatsby is involved in some sort of shifty business.

As Myrtle gets more and more drunk she also gets increasingly loud. After Tom gives her a puppy as a gift, she starts talking about Daisy. Tom warns her that she doesn't have the right to use Daisy's name. But she starts to tease him by repeatedly calling out "Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!" Tom punches her in the nose, breaking it. The party ends, and Nick takes the train home alone.

CHAPTER 3

Every Saturday night, Gatsby throws incredibly luxurious parties at his **mansion**. Nick eventually receives an invitation. At the party, he feels out of place, and notes that the party is filled with people who haven't been invited and who appear "agonizingly" aware of the "easy money" surrounding them. The main topic of conversation is rumors about Gatsby. Nick hears from various people that Gatsby is a German spy, an Oxford graduate, and someone even claims Gatsby once killed a man.

Nick runs into Jordan Baker at the party. While spending time with her, he observes all the amazing luxuries of the party: a live orchestra, a cornucopia of food and imported fruits, and endless reserves of alcohol.

The old money represented by Tom uses the "no money" people while pretending to help them. Wilson and Myrtle have different reactions to the world that has left them behind. Wilson is left weak and defeated, with vague dreams he can't fulfill. Myrtle wants desperately to be a part of the world she sees but can't touch, and so takes up with Tom.



The drunken party shows both the "fun" and hidden desperation of the Roaring Twenties. Getting drunk, it seems, is the only thing making the party fun, or at least bearable.



Rumors swirl around Gatsby. He has become so rich and is so mysterious he seems almost hollow—all surface and no substance.



Tom's degrading treatment of Myrtle reveals the cruel side of his privileged "old money" upbringing. His "loyalty" to Daisy also reveals his hypocrisy: he's cheating on her.



People used Gatsby for his extravagant parties: most of his "new money" guests didn't even know him. Gatsby continues to be a man who barely seems to exist beyond the rumors about him. Nick's feelings of discomfort at the party shows that he senses the emptiness behind the party.



The party's incredible luxury seems to be the fulfillment of the American Dream.



Nick and Jordan decide to find their mysterious host, and wander into Gatsby's library. There they meet a short, somewhat drunk man who wears owl-like glasses (and whom Nick refers to as Owl-Eyes). Owl Eyes is amazed by Gatsby's books: the vastness and "realism" of Gatsby's book collection astounds him.

The shallowness of the Roaring Twenties: the vast library of "realism" that Owl Eyes admires is full of books no one reads. The books contain "realism" but are just for show.



Later, as Nick and Jordan sit outside watching the party, Nick strikes up a conversation with the man sitting next to him. The man thinks Nick looks familiar. They realize they may have crossed paths during World War I. The man introduces himself: he's Jay Gatsby. Gatsby has a dazzling smile, and refers to everyone as "old sport."

Gatsby's enchanting smile is like a mask, just as the "fun" of the Roaring Twenties hides an emptiness beneath. Nick and Gatsby connect because they share a common past: the war.



Gatsby also interests Nick because he remains apart from the party, as if his pleasure derives from observing the spectacle, not participating in it.

Gatsby's distance suggests he has goals other than just fun and money.



At almost two in the morning, a butler approaches Jordan and asks her to come meet with Gatsby. She returns a while later from this meeting and tells Nick that she has just heard a story that is "the most amazing thing."

Until now Gatsby has been a smile and a bunch of rumors. Suddenly he has a story, a past, though Nick doesn't know what it is.



After saying goodbye to Gatsby (who has to run off to receive a phone call from Philadelphia), Nick leaves the party. As he walks home, he sees a crowd gathered around an automobile accident. The drunken Owl Eyes has driven his car into a ditch and is trying to get it out. After very little effort, Owl Eyes gives up and walks away, leaving the car where it is.

The crash is symbolic in two ways. It represents the reckless disregard of the Roaring Twenties and the inevitable plunge Fitzgerald sensed would end the boom. It also foreshadows a car accident later in the novel.



Nick then describes his everyday life that summer to the reader: he wants it clear he does more than just go to parties. He works each day in the city, has a brief relationship with a woman from New Jersey, and then begins to date Jordan Baker. Yet though he's attracted to Jordan, he doesn't like her because she's dishonest and even cheats at golf. Nick then says that he is one of the only honest people he's ever known.

Nick isn't comfortable with the carefree Roaring Twenties mentality of easy money and loose morals shared by other characters in the novel, including Jordan. He prefers substance, and generally seems honest. Yet having a relationship with someone he dislikes makes him not entirely honest.



CHAPTER 4

Nick observes some drunken women on Gatsby's lawn discussing Gatsby's mysterious identity, which includes all the usual rumors. Nick then lists a slew of the prominent guests who attended Gatsby's parties that summer, none of whom knew anything about their host.

Another damning portrayal of the Roaring Twenties. Nick's list of Gatsby's guests reads like a who's who of 1922, but they're all just using Gatsby for his hospitality.



Nick then describes accompanying Gatsby on a trip into the city for lunch. They ride to the city in Gatsby's monstrous cream-colored car. While he drives, Gatsby tells Nick about his past. Gatsby claims to be the son of wealthy parents from the "Midwest" town of San Francisco, to have graduated from Oxford, been a noted jewel collector in Europe and a decorated hero in the war. He even shows Nick a war medal, and then tells Nick to expect to hear a very sad story about him later in the afternoon.

Gatsby pays little attention to the speed limit, and a policeman pulls him over. Gatsby shows the officer a little card. The officer apologizes and lets him go.

For lunch they meet a business partner of Gatsby's named Meyer Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim tells Nick that Gatsby is a man of "fine breeding" who would "never so much as look at a friend's wife." As for Wolfsheim, Gatsby tells Nick he's the man behind the fixing of the 1919 World Series. Nick begins to think Gatsby's might be involved in organized crime.

On the way out of the restaurant, Nick sees Tom Buchanan and introduces him to Gatsby. Gatsby appears embarrassed and leaves the scene without saying goodbye.

After lunch, Nick meets Jordan at the Plaza Hotel. She tells him the "amazing thing" that Gatsby had told her earlier: as a young man, Gatsby had a passionate romance with Daisy Fay, who is now Daisy Buchanan. During the war, when Daisy was not yet twenty, Gatsby met her while he was stationed in Louisville and the two of them fell in love. Her family prevented Daisy from leaving and marrying Gatsby, and one year later she married Tom Buchanan, a wealthy man from Chicago who gave her a string of pearls worth \$350,000 and a three-month honeymoon to the South Seas.

Jordan finishes the story later in Central Park. She says Gatsby never fell out of love with Daisy and bought his **giant mansion** in West Egg to be across the bay from her. He had hoped that the magnificent house would impress her and win back her love. Nick realizes that the **green light** he saw Gatsby gazing at sits at the end of Daisy's dock. Finally, Jordan adds that Gatsby has requested that Nick invite Daisy over to his house for tea. Then Gatsby will show up so that Daisy will have to see him, even if, as Gatsby fears, she doesn't want to.

Gatsby's story is sketchy: he's a Midwesterner from San Francisco? It seems that in typical "new money" fashion, Gatsby entirely reinvented his identity after coming to New York and getting rich. Gatsby has achieved the American Dream of incredible wealth, but he had to give up his past to get it.



Gatsby acts like a superstar, above the law and the police.



Wolfsheim's connection to Gatsby is a sign of the corruption of the American Dream, "new money," and the Roaring Twenties. Wolfsheim equates wealth with "fine breeding," which is a very "new money" way of thinking.



Foreshadows the conflict between both Tom and Gatsby in particular and "old money" and "new money" in general.



Now Gatsby's purpose is clear. He has achieved the Roaring Twenties version of the American Dream by becoming very rich. To achieve that wealth he reinvented himself, possibly became involved in criminal activities, and sacrificed his past. But he did it all in service of a purer, more traditional American Dream: real love.



Daisy chose the security of money over love. So Gatsby made himself rich: he thinks that money will win her back. Now his mansion, the symbol of "new money," is directly across the bay from her house, symbolic of "old money." The green light represents both Gatsby's dream of recreating his past with Daisy and the corrupt American Dream of extreme wealth.



CHAPTER 5

After returning from the city, Nick encounters Gatsby late at night on his front lawn. Gatsby seems nervous, and asks if Nick would like to take a swim in his pool. Nick realizes that Gatsby's is trying to convince him to set up the meeting with Daisy. Nick tells Gatsby he'll do it. Gatsby then offers Nick the chance to join a "confidential," probably illegal, business venture. Nick is offended at Gatsby trying to buy him off, but continues to discuss with Gatsby the plans for how and when to arrange the meeting.

Gatsby is nervous on the day of the meeting. Though it's raining he sends a man to cut Nick's grass, and also makes sure Nick's house is full of flowers. Gatsby disappears just as Daisy arrives. When Gatsby arrives at Nick's front door, he looks pale and deathlike, and knocks over a clock by mistake.

Gatsby and Daisy treat each other formally at first, and Gatsby's nerves threaten to overwhelm him. Nick leaves them alone for half an hour. When he returns they are blissfully happy. Gatsby then takes them on a tour of his **mansion**. In Gatsby's bedroom, as he tells Daisy about staring at the **green light** on her dock. Daisy breaks down crying while looking through Gatsby's vast collection of luxurious English shirts.

Nick, meanwhile, privately wonders how Daisy can possibly fulfill Gatsby's idealized vision of her. Nick reflects that over the years Gatsby has remained faithful to their love, while Daisy has given herself to another man she never loved in exchange for the security of wealth.

They move from the house to Gatsby's well-manicured grounds. Gatsby remarks that mist on the bay blocks his view of Daisy's house and the single blinking **green light** on its dock.

Next, Gatsby gets one of his hangers-on, Ewing Klipspringer, to play the piano for the three of them. Gatsby holds Daisy's hand and she whispers something to him that seems to stir his emotions. Nick, sensing that they no longer realize he's there, leaves them, walking out alone into the rain.

Nick agrees to help Gatsby achieve his dream. Yet in that same moment Gatsby reveals how he has been corrupted by his pursuit of the money he feels is crucial to making his love with Daisy a reality. Instead of thanking Nick for his friendship and help, he offers him money. It's "new money" at its worst.



Gatsby's blunder with the clock is symbolic. He knocks over time just as he tries to recreate his past with Daisy.



Two ways to view Daisy's breakdown: 1) she realizes that Gatsby could have given her the life she chose by marrying Tom or 2) she realizes that she's most in love with money. Either way, she misses Gatsby describing his love for her.



Gatsby's focus on the past prevents him from seeing how Daisy has changed. In fact, it prevents him from even considering the possibility that she could have changed.



The light has no significance now that Gatsby seems to have achieved his dream: Daisy.



Once Gatsby achieves his dream, he becomes absorbed in it, and forgets Nick. A critique of "new money" values.



CHAPTER 6

Nick notes that newspaper reporters soon started to appear at Gatsby's home to try to interview him. He then gives Gatsby's biographical details, the truth behind both the public rumors and Gatsby's own claims: born James Gatz on a farm in North Dakota around 1900; changed his name to Jay Gatsby at age seventeen; spends more than a year on the south shore of Lake Superior clamming and fishing; attends and drops out of St. Olaf College in southern Minnesota after two weeks; meets Dan Cody, a fifty year-old multimillionaire expert in mining and precious metals, and ends up as his assistant for five years aboard the *Tuolomee*, Cody's boat; Cody dies and leaves Gatsby \$25,000, which he never receives due to a legal technicality; Gatsby dedicates himself to becoming rich and successful.

Like so many who sought and achieved the American Dream during the Roaring Twenties, Gatsby is a self-made man. He literally created himself, even changing his name in order to become a "success." Gatsby's story is not as unique as all the rumors about him suggest. Instead, he represents a typical member of the rags-to-riches "new money" class.



For a few weeks, Nick doesn't see Gatsby. Then, one afternoon, Gatsby turns up at his house. A few moments later, Tom Buchanan also shows up unexpectedly with some friends, the Sloanes. Gatsby tells Tom that he knows his wife, and invites Tom and his friends to stay for dinner. They say they can't stay, but invite Gatsby to dinner. Gatsby doesn't realize that the invitation was just to be polite, and accepts.

The conflict between Gatsby and Tom, new money and old money, continues to build. Here, Gatsby fails to understand the "old money" behavior of insincere politeness; he mistakes it for actual politeness. "Old Money" hides its cruelty, and calls it good manners.



The next Saturday night, Tom and Daisy come to a party at Gatsby's. The party strikes Nick as particularly unpleasant. Tom is disdainful of the party, and though Daisy and Gatsby dance together she also seems to have a bad time. As Tom and Daisy are leaving, Tom says he suspects Gatsby's fortune comes from bootlegging, which Nick denies. Daisy says Gatsby made his money from drug stores that he built up himself.

Nick has clearly come to sympathize with Gatsby against Tom. Tom's disdain for the party is to be expected. But that Daisy has a bad time suggests that Gatsby might not so easily be able to recreate their love. There may be too many obstacles.



After the party, Gatsby is depressed. He suspects that Daisy neither enjoyed the party nor understands the depth of his feelings for her. Nick reminds him that the past is impossible to repeat, but Gatsby disagrees. He says he will return everything to the way it was before.

Gatsby believes in the future and the American Dream, and believes that money can buy both.



Nick recalls a memory that Gatsby once shared with him about the first time Gatsby kissed Daisy. Nick calls Gatsby's sentimentality about history "appalling" and reflects that in that kiss Gatsby's dreams of success focused solely on Daisy. She became an idealized dream for Gatsby and the center of his life.

Nick calls Gatsby's sentimentality appalling because it has made Daisy into a symbol of perfection, an idealized vision to which Gatsby has sacrificed his identity.



CHAPTER 7

Gatsby's house becomes much quieter, and his party's come to an end. Nick visits, and learns that Gatsby ended the parties because he no longer needed them to attract Daisy. He also learns that Gatsby also fired all of his servants because Daisy thought they might gossip about their relationship (she now visits often during the afternoon). He replaced the servants with some of Wolfsheim's men.

On the hottest day of the summer, Daisy invites Nick and Gatsby to lunch with her, Tom, and Jordan. At one point, while Tom is out of the room, Daisy kisses Gatsby on the lips and says she loves him. But the next instant the nurse leads in her young daughter, Pammy. Daisy basically ignores the child, but Gatsby keeps glancing at the little girl in surprise.

When Tom and Gatsby take a tour around the house, Gatsby points out that his house is directly across the sound from Tom's house.

The lunch is awkward, at least in part because of the intense heat. At one point Daisy asks what they should do with the rest of the day and the next thirty years of their lives. She cries out that she wants them all to go to the city. Daisy and Gatsby lock eyes, and Daisy comments that Gatsby always looks like an advertisement. Tom can see in Daisy's eyes that Daisy and Gatsby are in love. He suddenly agrees that they should all go to the city.

Before they leave for the city, Nick and Gatsby have a moment alone, in which they agree that Daisy is indiscreet. Gatsby comments that Daisy's voice is "full of money."

Tom insists on driving Gatsby's big yellow car. Gatsby and Daisy travel alone in Tom's coupe, while Tom drives Nick and Jordan. It's clear Tom now knows about the affair between Gatsby and Daisy. Gatsby's car is low on gas, though, and Tom pulls in to Wilson's Garage in the **Valley of Ashes**.

While selling him the gas, Wilson inquires about buying Tom's other car to resell it. He says he's trying to raise money to finance the move **west** that he has planned for him and his wife Myrtle. Tom is startled at the imminent loss of his mistress.

As soon as he gets Daisy, Gatsby no longer needs "new money" parties. But Gatsby can't escape the way he corrupted himself in his quest to become rich enough to win Daisy, as the presence of Wolfsheim's men shows.



When Daisy kisses Gatsby it seems that he's won. But even Gatsby senses that Daisy's daughter symbolizes a shared past between Daisy and Tom that Gatsby can't touch.



The opposition of the houses shows the rivalry between Gatsby and Tom.



Tom discovers Daisy and Gatsby's affair. Daisy's comparing Gatsby to a man in an advertisement is her way of saying she loves him. For Daisy, corrupted by the consumer culture of the Roaring Twenties, love is just another material thing that can be advertised.



Gatsby seems to half-sense that Daisy has been corrupted.



The car swap is a crucial plot point, and comes about through Tom and Gatsby's conflict, old money versus new.



Wilson has his own dream of moving west. With Daisy's affair and Myrtle about to go west with Wilson, Tom's world now really is falling apart.



Wilson adds that he has "wised up" recently and became physically ill upon discovering that his wife has been living a double life. Nick realizes that Wilson has figured out his wife is having an affair but doesn't know that Tom is the other man. He also thinks that Wilson and Tom are identical, except that Tom is healthy and Wilson sick.

Nick notices the haunting eyes of **Doctor T. J. Eckleburg** looming in the distance, then spots Myrtle Wilson staring down from the windows above the garage at Jordan Baker, whom she seems to have mistaken for Daisy, her rival in love.

In the city, the group takes a suite at the Plaza Hotel near Central Park. Soon after arriving, Tom challenges Gatsby's history as an "Oxford man." When Gatsby successfully answers the question, Tom then asks what kind of a split Gatsby's trying to cause between Tom and his wife. Daisy tries and fails to quiet Tom.

Gatsby says Daisy never loved Tom and has only ever loved him. Tom protests, but Daisy says it's true.

Yet when Tom asks her to think about their history together, Daisy admits that she did love Tom in the past, she just loved Gatsby too. Gatsby is stunned.

Tom pushes his advantage: he reveals that Gatsby really is involved with organized crime, such as bootlegging. All this terrifies Daisy, who begs that they leave and go home. Tom, realizing he's won, tells her to go back with Gatsby, who won't "annoy" her anymore.

Nick remembers at that moment that the day is his thirtieth birthday. He says that a "menacing" new decade stretched before him. In Tom's car heading back toward Long Island (Gatsby and Daisy took Gatsby's car), Nick observes that unlike Daisy, people like Jordan Baker know better than to hold onto irretrievable dreams. Nick describes the car he rides in as driving toward death.

The point of view shifts to that of Michaelis, a Greek man who runs the coffee shop next to George Wilson's garage, and who, Nick, says, was the chief witness in the police investigation: that afternoon, Michaelis saw Wilson sick in his office and heard Myrtle struggling upstairs. Wilson told him he had locked her up until they moved **west** the following day.

Nick sees across class lines to the fundamental similarity between Tom and Wilson. Wealth does not make Tom any better than Wilson, it just keeps him healthier and stronger.



Myrtle seeing Tom with Gatsby's car is another crucial plot point. Myrtle's despair at seeing Tom with his "wife" is linked to T. J. Eckleburg's dead eyes.



The confrontation between Tom and Gatsby, old money and new money, comes out into the open. Daisy does not want the confrontation to happen. She likes things the way they are.



Gatsby's sacrifice appears to have been worth it.



Gatsby considers Daisy's only past to be the single month she shared with him.



Gatsby corrupted himself and his dream to win Daisy's heart. Now that corruption scares her away. Tom sends Daisy off with Gatsby as a final insult.



Nick envies those not haunted by the past (though he's wrong about Jordan). Nick's wariness about the future and his comment about the car headed toward death foreshadow a death in the novel and the end of the Roaring Twenties.



Wilson tries to make his dream of a new life with Myrtle a reality. (The shift in point of view makes sense in the novel because Nick can recreate Michaelis's experience by reading or viewing Michaelis's testimony.)



That evening, though, Michaelis saw Myrtle shout at Wilson downstairs and then run into the street where she was struck and killed by a passing car that may have been light **green**.

The point of view shifts back to Nick: Tom, Nick, and Jordan arrive at the scene in their car. Both Tom and Wilson are overwhelmed by grief at Myrtle's death. Tom suspects that it was Gatsby who hit Myrtle.

Tom, Jordan, and Nick drive to the Buchanan's house. Tom calls a taxi for Nick. As Nick waits for it outside, he sees Gatsby hiding in the bushes. Gatsby tells him that Daisy was driving the car and that he tried to stop the accident, but was too late. He says he'll take responsibility for it. He's less interested in what happened to Myrtle though, than in his fear that Tom will harm Daisy.

Nick goes and checks on Daisy through the window, and sees Tom and Daisy sitting on either side of some fried chicken, reconciled. They are not exactly happy, Nick thinks, but not exactly unhappy either.

Nick tells Gatsby everything is quiet, but Gatsby still refuses to leave. Nick leaves him "watching over nothing."

Nearly every character's "Dream" dies with Myrtle's death.



Tom realizes that Myrtle saw Gatsby's car and thought it was Tom's car because he had been driving it earlier.



Daisy caused the crash, but just as old money hides its corruption behind a veneer of good manners, Daisy hides behind Gatsby. Gatsby dedicated his life to winning Daisy's heart. Now he only cares about her and ignores Myrtle's death.



Daisy chooses the security of Tom over Gatsby's love, just as she did while Gatsby was away at the war.



Gatsby can't give up his dream, even though it's dead.



CHAPTER 8

Nick visits Gatsby for breakfast the next morning. Gatsby tells Nick that Daisy never came outside the previous night, but rejects Nick's advice to forget Daisy and leave Long Island. He tells Nick about the early days of his relationship with Daisy. He remembers how taken he was by her wealth, her enormous house, and even by the fact that other men had loved her. To be with her he let her believe he was of the same class as her. One night they slept together, and he felt he had married her. Then he left for World War I. Daisy waited for a while and then drifted away from him and into marriage with Tom Buchanan.

Gatsby and Nick finish breakfast. As they walk together, the gardener tells Gatsby he's going to drain the pool. But Gatsby tells him to wait. He says he hasn't used it once all summer, and would like to. On his way out, Nick tells Gatsby that he's worth more than all of the "rotten crowd... put together." Gatsby smiles broadly.

Gatsby's story explains his actions. He was in love with the idea of Daisy: Daisy's love gave Gatsby an identity as a young man, and made his manufactured "new money" identity legitimate. To preserve that identity, he had to have her. Note that "old money" types like Tom could avoid the war while poor nobodies like Gatsby couldn't.



Nick always disapproved of the way Gatsby lived his life, but he respected the purity of Gatsby's dream. He certainly preferred it to the "rotten crowd" that used Gatsby.



At work that day, Nick falls asleep. The phone wakes him: it's Jordan. Their conversation quickly turns unpleasant and one of them hangs up on the other. Nick finds that he doesn't care.

Next, Nick relates what happened at Wilson's garage after Myrtle's death. Wilson spent all night talking to Michaelis about Myrtle, revealing that she had a lover and his suspicion that the man driving the car must have been her lover because she ran out to meet it. He told Michaelis how he had confronted her and told her she was sinning in the eyes of God. It was near dawn at this point, and Wilson was staring into the **eyes of T. J. Eckleburg** when he mentioned God. Wilson says he has a way of finding out who was driving the car and later that morning disappeared from the garage.

At two, Gatsby went for a swim, leaving word that he was to be alerted if any phone call came. None came. Later that afternoon, Nick and some of Wolfsheim's men working at Gatsby's house discover Gatsby, shot dead in his pool. Wilson's dead body is close by lying in the grass.

CHAPTER 9

It's now two years later and Nick is recounting his memories of the days shortly after Gatsby's death. Wild rumors about Gatsby's relationship with Myrtle and Wilson swirl, and reporters and other gossips prowl around the **mansion** looking for stories.

Nick finds himself the primary contact for all matters relating to Gatsby because nobody else wanted to be. Daisy and Tom disappear with no forwarding address, and Meyer Wolfsheim says he has pressing business and can't help at the present time.

Three days after Gatsby's death, a telegram arrives from his father, Henry C. Gatz. Mr. Gatz arrives in person at Gatsby's **mansion** a few days later. He appears old, dressed in cheap clothing, and is devastated by his son's death, who he believed was destined for great things. He asks Nick what his relationship was to Gatsby. Nick says they were close friends.

That night, Klipspringer calls. Nick tells him about the funeral. But Klipspringer says he can't attend because he has to attend a picnic in Greenwich, Connecticut. Klipspringer then asks if Nick could send to him a pair of tennis shoes he had left at Gatsby's mansion.

The events of last night have convinced Nick to cut ties with the old money world of Tom and Daisy.



Myrtle's death destroys Wilson's dream, leaving him nothing. The Roaring Twenties conflict between old and new money has destroyed him: he can't even distinguish an advertisement from God. Wilson's "way" of finding out who killed Myrtle is mysterious. Fitzgerald is building tension.



The recklessness of the Roaring Twenties destroys every relationship: Myrtle and Wilson, Myrtle and Tom, Daisy and Gatsby, Jordan and Nick. Only "old money" prevails: Daisy returns to Tom.



In death, Gatsby is just as he was in life: little more than a rumor spread by Roaring Twenties "new money" socialites.



The abandonment of Gatsby reveals the emptiness of the age. Wolfsheim and the Buchanans are all corrupt at heart.



Gatz's appearance confirms that Gatsby rose from humble beginnings to achieve the American Dream. Yet in the process he left behind his father, who truly loves him. He gave up his past.



Gatsby's "new money" friends are shallow, emotionless parasites who care only about "fun."



Gatsby's funeral takes place the next day. In an effort to assemble more people to attend the service, Nick goes to New York to try to retrieve Wolfsheim in person. At his sketchy office, Wolfsheim discusses memories of his early days of friendship with Gatsby, whom he claims to have raised up "out of nothing." Nick tries to convince him to attend the funeral, but he refuses, citing a policy he has of not getting mixed up with murdered men.

Nick returns to Gatsby's house for the funeral. Only Nick, Henry Gatz, and, to Nick's surprise, Owl Eyes show up. Owl Eyes pities Gatsby as a "poor son-of-a-bitch."

Nick now describes *The Great Gatsby* as a story of the **West** since many of the key characters (Daisy, Tom, Nick, Jordan, Gatsby) involved were not from the **East**. He says that after Gatsby's death, the East became haunted for him.

Nick goes to Jordan Baker's house to set things straight with her. She tells him she is engaged to another man, though Nick doesn't really believe her. Then she accuses Nick of being dishonest with her. Nick leaves, feeling angry and sorry.

Later that October, Nick runs into Tom Buchanan on Fifth Avenue in New York. He refuses to shake Tom's hand, and learns that Tom was the one who told George Wilson that Gatsby ran over Myrtle. Tom adds also that he cried when he gave up the apartment in which he conducted his affair with Myrtle. Nick doesn't tell Tom that Daisy was at the wheel. He describes Tom and Daisy as careless people who destroy things and then retreat back into their money.

On his last night in West Egg before moving back home to Minnesota, Nick walks down to Gatsby's beach and looks out over Long Island sound. He wonders how the first settlers to America must have felt staring out at the "**green** breast" of the new continent, and imagines Gatsby's similar wonder when he realized that tiny blinking green light across the bay belonged to Daisy Buchanan.

Wolfsheim exhibits the worst qualities of the "new money" class: he is corrupt, selfish, and callous. By claiming to have raised Gatsby up from nothing, Wolfsheim essentially claims that money is everything.



Owl Eyes' appearance at the funeral suggests that Gatsby, like the novels Owl Eyes admired, was a mere ornament.



The American Dream had long involved people moving west, to find work and opportunity. The novel documents a time when the tide had shifted the other way, as Westerners sought to join those making money in financial industries like "bonds" in the East. But now Nick seems to see such searching after wealth and status in the east as corrupt and deadening, as people returning to their past only to find ghosts.



Nick thought his relationship with Jordan was superficial. But Jordan implies she really loved him. Nick, too, it appears, was corrupted by the East.



Tom doesn't even know that Daisy was really driving the car. Tom is completely blind to the emptiness of his old money world. He even sees himself as a victim for losing Myrtle, his mistress. His corruption is complete.



Nick connects Gatsby's American Dream of winning Daisy's love to the American Dream of the first settlers coming to America. Both dreams were noble, and ultimately much more complicated and dangerous than anyone could have predicted.



Nick describes Gatsby as a believer in the future, a man of promise and faith. He compares everyone to Gatsby, moving forward with their arms outstretched like Gatsby on the shore, like boats beating upstream against the current, looking to the future but searching for a lost past.

Nick sees Gatsby as symbolic of everyone in America, each with his or her own great dream. And each dream an effort to regain a past already lost.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Kestler, Justin. "The Great Gatsby." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jul 2013. Web. 19 Aug 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kestler, Justin. "The Great Gatsby." LitCharts LLC, July 22, 2013. Retrieved August 19, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-great-gatsby>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Great Gatsby* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner. 2004.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner. 2004.