



# The Great Gatsby





## F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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*American novelist*

**F. Scott Fitzgerald** was a so-called 'Jazz Age' novelist and short-story writer who is considered one of the best American writers of the twentieth century. His most famous novel is "The Great Gatsby" (1925), which also describes the American life in the 1920s.

He was born in Minnesota, on 24 September 1896, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was named after his ancestor Francis Scott Key, the writer of the American national anthem. Fitzgerald grew up in Minnesota and enrolled at Princeton University in 1913.

He became a prominent figure in the literary life of the university but he struggled academically and never graduated. He joined the army in November 1917.

In Montgomery, Alabama, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge.

Zelda agreed to marry him, but she broke off the engagement because of her desire for wealth and leisure. With the publication of *This Side of Paradise* (1920), Fitzgerald became a celebrity and he finally convinced Zelda to marry him.

With his new wealth and fame, Fitzgerald fell into a lavish lifestyle of parties and decadence. At the same time, he was desperate to write something 'serious'.

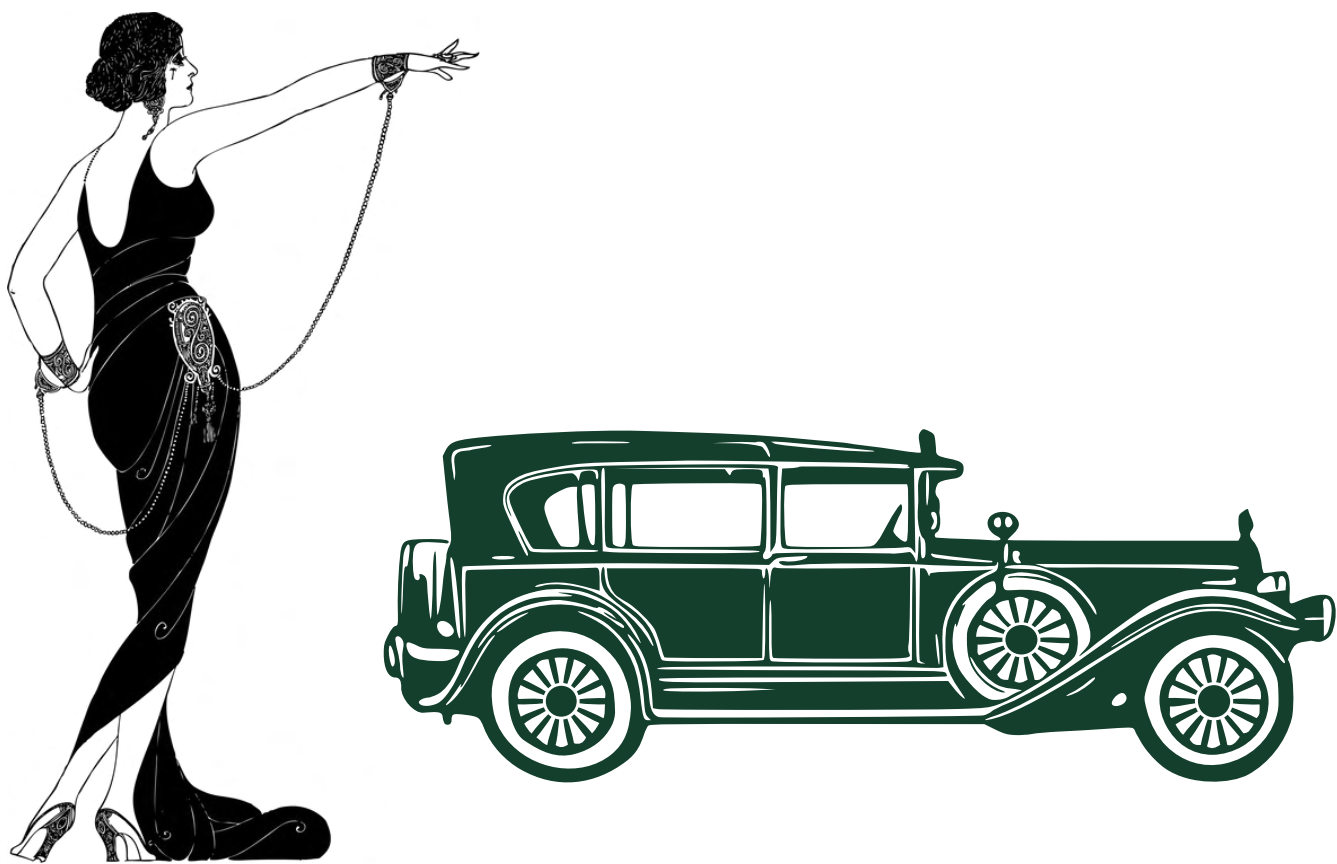
He moved to France with Zelda and their daughter Frances, and he completed *The Great Gatsby*. In the 1930s, they tried to save their marriage unsuccessfully: Fitzgerald constantly had money worries and became alcoholic, and Zelda suffered a nervous breakdown.

In 1937, he managed to acquire work as a script-writer in Hollywood. There he met Sheilah Graham, a prominent British-born American gossip columnist and author who had a significant personal and professional relationship with F. Scott Fitzgerald during the last years of his life.

She provided emotional and practical support, helping him manage his health and encouraging his writing. On December 21, 1940, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack at the age of forty-four, leaving his last novel *The Last Tycoon* unfinished.

Many of these events in the real life of Fitzgerald appear in “*The Great Gatsby*”, published in 1925. Like Fitzgerald, Nick Carraway is a thoughtful young man from Minnesota, educated at an Ivy League school, who moves to New York after the war.

Also similar to Fitzgerald is Jay Gatsby, a sensitive young man who idolises wealth and luxury and who falls in love with the daughter of a wealthy family while stationed at a military camp in the South.



## SYNOPSIS

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"The Great Gatsby," set in the summer of 1922, follows Nick Carraway, a Yale graduate and World War I veteran, who moves to West Egg, Long Island, to learn about the bond business. He lives next door to Jay Gatsby, a mysterious and wealthy man known for his extravagant parties.

Gatsby is deeply in love with Nick's cousin, Daisy Buchanan, whom he met before the war. Daisy, now married to the wealthy but unfaithful Tom Buchanan, rekindles her romance with Gatsby. Tensions arise, culminating in a confrontation where Tom exposes Gatsby's criminal past.

Tragically, Daisy accidentally kills Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, with Gatsby's car, and Gatsby takes the blame. Myrtle's husband, George, believing Gatsby was driving and Myrtle's lover, kills Gatsby before taking his own life.

Disillusioned by the moral decay he witnesses, Nick returns to the Midwest, leaving behind the empty promises of the American Dream that Gatsby's life embodied.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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The historical context of "The Great Gatsby" is essential to understanding its themes and characters. The novel, published in 1925, is set in the summer of 1922 and reflects the social and economic climate of post-World War I America, often referred to as the Roaring Twenties.

**Here are the key historical aspects:**

### THE ROARING TWENTIES

This decade was marked by significant economic prosperity and cultural change. The U.S. economy grew rapidly, leading to an increase in consumerism and material wealth. Innovations in technology and industry, such as the automobile and mass production, transformed American life. This era saw a shift towards urbanization, with people flocking to cities for better opportunities.

### THE JAZZ AGE

Coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Jazz Age refers to the period's vibrant and carefree culture. Jazz music, characterized by its lively and improvisational style, became immensely popular. This cultural shift was associated with a loosening of social norms, reflected in the rise of flappers (young women known for their bold fashion and behaviour), illegal bars, and a general atmosphere of rebellion against traditional values.

### PROHIBITION

From 1920 to 1933, the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages. This led to the rise of bootlegging (illegal production and distribution of alcohol) and speakeasies, contributing to the era's lawlessness and moral ambiguity. Gatsby's wealth, implied to come from bootlegging, ties directly into this aspect of the historical context.



### POST-WORLD WAR I DISILLUSIONMENT

The aftermath of World War I left many Americans feeling disillusioned and sceptical of traditional values. The war's devastation prompted a questioning of the previously upheld ideals of honour and duty. This sense of disillusionment is reflected in the characters' cynicism and the overall tone of the novel.

### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Despite the economic boom, the period was marked by significant social stratification. The gap between the wealthy elite and the poor widened, with the newly rich (like Gatsby) often looked down upon by the old-money aristocracy (like Tom and Daisy Buchanan). This social divide is a central element of the novel, highlighting the limitations of the American Dream.

### WOMEN'S CHANGING ROLES

The 1920s saw significant changes in women's roles and rights. The 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, granted women the right to vote, symbolizing a shift towards greater gender equality. Women began to assert more independence, both socially and economically. Characters like Daisy and Jordan Baker reflect the complexities of these changing roles, embodying both traditional and modern attitudes.

### TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS

The period was marked by rapid technological advancements that transformed daily life. The widespread adoption of automobiles, for example, not only symbolized freedom and mobility but also played a significant role in the novel's plot. Other innovations, such as radio and film, helped shape the era's culture and social dynamics.

ROARING 20s

## THEMES

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### THE AMERICAN DREAM

Fitzgerald critiques the American Dream, suggesting it has been corrupted by materialism and decadence. Jay Gatsby embodies the dream's promise, rising from poverty to immense wealth, but his success is built on criminal enterprises and lies. The novel questions whether the American Dream is attainable or just an illusion, highlighting the disparity between the ideal and reality.



### CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

The novel explores the rigid social hierarchy of the 1920s. Characters are divided into "old money" (Tom and Daisy Buchanan), "new money" (Gatsby), and the working class (George and Myrtle Wilson). These distinctions underscore the difficulties of true social mobility. Gatsby's lavish parties and wealth cannot buy him acceptance into the elite class, revealing the entrenched nature of social divisions.



### LOVE AND DESIRE

Romantic and material desires drive the characters. Gatsby's love for Daisy is idealized, rooted in the past, and ultimately unattainable. Tom and Daisy's marriage, characterized by infidelity and convenience, exemplifies the hollow nature of relationships within their social stratum. This theme exposes the complex interplay between genuine emotion and societal expectations.



### THE PAST AND MEMORY

The tension between past and present is a central theme. Gatsby's obsessive desire to recreate his past with Daisy contrasts with Nick Carraway's understanding that the past cannot be reclaimed. This theme highlights the characters' struggles with their histories and the consequences of attempting to relive or deny them.



### MORAL DECAY AND CYNICISM

The novel portrays the moral decay of society during the Jazz Age. Characters engage in reckless behaviour, infidelity, and crime, reflecting a broader societal decline. The "valley of ashes" symbolizes this decay, and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, overlooking this wasteland, serve as a metaphor for the loss of spiritual values in a world driven by materialism.



### ILLUSION VS. REALITY

Gatsby's life is a construct of illusions, from his self-made persona to his dream of rekindling his romance with Daisy. The novel contrasts these illusions with harsh realities, such as Gatsby's criminal background and Daisy's ultimate rejection of him. This theme underscores the fragility of the characters' constructed realities and the inevitable clash with the truth.



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## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

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F. Scott Fitzgerald employs various types of figurative language in "The Great Gatsby" to enrich the narrative and convey deeper meanings.

**Metaphors:** Fitzgerald frequently uses metaphors to draw comparisons between unrelated things, adding layers of meaning.

*Example: "Her voice is full of money." This metaphor illustrates Daisy Buchanan's association with wealth and the allure it brings.*

**Similes:** He often employs similes to create vivid comparisons, using "like" or "as."

**Personification:** Fitzgerald gives human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract concepts to create vivid imagery.

**Hyperbole:** Exaggeration is used to emphasize certain qualities or themes.

*Example: "I'm p-paralyzed with happiness." This hyperbolic statement underscores the intense, almost overwhelming emotions of the characters.*

**Alliteration:** The repetition of initial consonant sounds adds a musical quality to the prose.

**Irony:** Fitzgerald uses irony to highlight the contradictions and moral ambiguities of the characters and their world.

*Example: Gatsby's grand parties are full of people, yet he remains lonely and unfulfilled.*

**Symbolism:**

- The Green Light: The green light at the end of Daisy's dock represents Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future. It symbolizes the unreachable and the illusion of the American Dream.
- The Valley of Ashes: This desolate area between West Egg and New York City represents moral and social decay resulting from the uninhibited pursuit of wealth.
- The Eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg: These fading eyes on a billboard in the Valley of Ashes symbolize the loss of spiritual values in America and are often interpreted as representing the eyes of God watching over a morally bankrupt society.



## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

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### *Sequins in Sequence*



When I was thirteen, my English teacher asked me about what I might want to read. “Er, dunno...” I replied, “parties... girls?” (having never been to the former, and barely spoken to the latter). *The Great Gatsby* was thrust into my hands. Re-reading it years later, I remember first having been marked by those sensorial passages about the champagne convoys; the aquaplanes; the coloured lights; the wild parties; and the glittering girls. My first impressions were of course very common to many readers, so much so that ‘Gatsby’ has come to denote glitz and glamour in popular culture today.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel is widely considered the definitive portrait of an era of social change in 1920s New York. Yet it is also a commercial mononym for luxury goods; the name of my hair wax; a theme for high-class, black-tie soirées; and associated with its Hollywood-star incarnations – Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert Redford. Because of these connotations, the novel – like its protagonist – has also become perhaps one of the most frequently misapprehended. Where Jay Gatsby, the moniker, is redolent of jazz, pizzazz, and razzmatazz, James Gatz, the character, has a journey far more Romantic in nature. Nick Carraway’s account of discovering James Gatz on West Egg concerns itself with unravelling his undivided yearning for bygone days with Daisy. In Portuguese, they call this *saudade*; in German, *verlangen*. Having since experienced melancholic longing for a beloved, yet absent someone, it is a book that has become more meaningful to me with age.

After the Great War, James settles in West Egg, hopeful to rekindle his love for Daisy, who lives in the East. He meditates ghoulishly on repeating his past with her, and so he throws extravagant parties to attract her across the Bay; parties through which he passes unknown in his own home. On his unrelenting quest to regain his treasure, he is ultimately unable to be truly present in the frenzy of his own prohibitive age. His warped sense of value dwarfs his capacity for happiness, as he walks blindly into the face of death. Like a star itself, Gatsby’s hopes rise in the East; and die in the West, “borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

When Grantly Marshall asked me whether I would direct *The Great Gatsby* as a stage production, I asked myself a few questions. How would I undertake the impossibly wonderful task of staging the mind's eye of the novel? How could I create a world of impossible wealth with limited wealth? How could I draw out the novel's complexities in simple terms? In truth, I hesitated. The beautiful, literary prose seemed to me almost too delicate to find sharp form in the Theatre's winds of sound. After all, the Theatre favours action and has an unforgiving relationship to adjectives and adverbs; it can never contend with the metaphysical, abstract expression of the Novel. This challenge of reconciliation seemed even greater knowing it would be performed for foreign-language, younger audiences. With a loose plot that time-jumps over a Summer. And the obvious challenge of staging gargantuan, decadent parties with only five actors. The problems were numerous.

I resolved myself to Carraway's own conclusion: to suit the production's needs, I must be "both within and without" the novel itself.

Thus, I have been sparing in including narration. Any direct narration is expressively balanced with theatre's great friends – movement and song. The chapters are trimmed to favour the attention spans of modern life: a dynamic, dramatic through-line replaces the descriptive elegy of Fitzgerald's fin-de-siècle-inspired prose. Costume (designed by Ruth Norwood) speaks in place of character descriptions – allowing sequins to distil sequences. ADR voice-tracks and music have been produced to create a soundscape redolent of the era. In essence, I have quelled my desire to render justice to the Novel and put my trust in the multiplicities of theatrical expression.

When configuring the *mise-en-scène*, I saw that the book had offered me a wonderful clue: I should construct the "satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." In other words, the audience would venture beyond the bounds of Realism and into the country of illusion: they would see the naked theatre at work. I asked Phillippe Gurrey, therefore, to design and forge a set that offers a semi-literal world. A world in which one glimpses structures of a mansion-house, a garage, or an automobile, but never the entirety of its parts. A world in which one does not see everything one hears. An immersive world of puppetry, prop-play, and where actors double roles. I can only hope that Fitzgerald himself would approve of an aesthetics of *verfremdungseffekt*, where the audience's part of imaginative construction doffs a cap to the power of the novelistic mind's eye.

I believe that the book deserves its standing in contention for the Great American Novel. Especially in a world where the divide between cities and the countryside is more pronounced; where increased foreign travel cleaves romance; where traumas of war remain ever present; where the axiom of American liberty falls foul to its violent expression; where some crave a reasonable world “in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever”; and others are governed by the pillars of passion and emotion beyond reason to make their lives great again. It is, in many ways, timeless.

It is also of its time. I also consider that it would be a missed theatrical opportunity to simply mount the world of one hundred years ago on today’s stage. Notably, I have addressed the objectifying descriptions of women, whose stage-action is often conscribed to gossip and whose decisions are linked to men. The wonderful acting company have playfully interrogated this problematic gaze in rehearsals. We have therefore re-gendered characters; experimented with drag; reappropriated men’s dialogue; and fashioned more stage action for the actresses. Crucially, both the roles of neglected wife and tearaway mistress are played by the same actress: a doubling that interrogates the novel’s sexual conflict from a more holistic angle true to theatre’s terms. Though I must concede, I would have hoped to have gone further into the topic of race than I have been able to do with my five-person ensemble. I have at least cut questionably extrinsic sections of the book that address racial politics, but I would love to see another stage production that dynamises these tensions in greater detail.

In sum, while this adaptation, written a century to the month after Fitzgerald’s book, conceives of itself in terms true to the fictional world of one-hundred years ago – a world shrouded in a veneer of dreams, through which hidden, heartfelt desires bubble up – it also reflects the world we inhabit today. Like the characters of its piece, to my author, I have been both faithful and unfaithful. I have discovered that that which is spectacular in *The Great Gatsby* is far greater than the spectacle itself. And that the Theatre has a physics of its own. I hope you enjoy the show.

10th August 2024

*Leopold Benedict*

## CHARACTERS

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### **NICK CARRAWAY:**

Perspicacious and sensitive protagonist of the play. Finding himself at the eye of a Jazz-Age, hedonist storm, Nick proves both an articulate narrator and sharp listener to others. His eagerness for life gives focus to those around him, though at times, to the point of conceding his own sense of virtue. Notably, he facilitates the affair between Gatsby & Daisy. He is considered a typical example of the 'unreliable narrator.' Historical scholarship has focused on his place within the 'lost generation' of those affected by the horrors of World War I; modern scholarship has investigated his plausible queerness, and his embodiment of American pastoral idealism.

### **TOM BUCHANAN:**

An old-moneyed polo player, with a brash sense of humour, Tom Buchanan is a strapping man, nostalgic of his sporting past. He can be prone to jealousy, and when defensive, Tom recurses to threaten and demand to reassert his control. He utilises his wealth and privilege to make statements about others. He is quick to say how he feels, though often insecure about what he says. He has a history of infidelity, though outraged by Gatsby's behaviour with his own wife. For some, he is seen as the embodiment of a certain masculinity within traditional patriarchal gender norms.

### **JAMES GATZ (JAY GATSBY):**

James Gatz is an enigmatic, nouveau riche millionaire known by others as Jay Gatsby. He lives in a mansion-house he commissioned, having gained his fortune by reasons unknown. Though a host of wild, lavish parties, his own attention remains elsewhere, across the Bay. In his love-blind myopia, he is prepared to lie—even in the face of death. He is often equated as the false prophet of the Great American Dream, and his 'cipher' origins have led some to suggest he may be of obscure religio-ethnic identity.



**DAISY BUCHANAN:**

To others, Daisy seems the paragon of perfection: charming, wealthy, sophisticated, graceful—the ‘golden girl.’ To herself, her privilege proves her curse—she is fought over by men like a treasure—dominated and deified. Bored, she acts out in fickle and sardonic ways. Absenting herself from responsibility, she ultimately chooses money over romance. Her story echoes the relationship between the real-life Ginevra King and the author F. Scott Fitzgerald. King’s father prevented their relationship, saying that ‘poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls,’ before Fitzgerald was sent away (like Gatsby) to war.

**JORDAN BAKER:**

Jordan is a professional golfer and travels independently to tournaments on the circuit. As a socialite, she is perceived as sophisticated and ‘jaunty,’ though prone to gossip and laced with a degree of cynicism. At times, she uses her outward confidence to conceal herself, guarding her introspections and fragility. Jordan bends the truth to keep the world at a distance and protect herself from its cruelty. Unmarried and a drinker, her attitude and nature mark her as one of the “new women” of the Roaring Twenties.



## QUESTIONS

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### Questions for Students

1. **“I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.”**

Can we trust Nick as a narrator in *The Great Gatsby*? Why or why not?

2. **Parties are a constant feature of *The Great Gatsby*.**

Do you notice a shift in the atmosphere between them? How do they differ, and how does this help to tell the story?

3. **Some consider that the infidelity between Gatsby & Daisy feels somehow justified**, yet between Myrtle & Tom we deplore it. Why might that be?

4. **“I didn’t want you to think I was just some nobody.”**

What do you think this says about Gatsby’s motivations, and how does this relate to the American Dream?

5. **Gatsby spends the novel “trying to forget something very sad that happened to me long ago.”**

How does the Great War play a part in Daisy & Jay’s broken romance, and indeed in 1920s America?

6. **“I like large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy.”**

What do you feel Fitzgerald is saying about loneliness here?



**7. What/where are the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg?**

What might they symbolize?

**8. Why does Daisy ultimately marry Tom instead of Gatsby?**

**9. Fitzgerald’s fictional world reflects that of its time** – flapper women, film stars, dance crazes, the mafia, racism, prohibition.

Can you think of any modern-day equivalents of these trends?

**10. Nick considers that “there was something gorgeous” about Gatsby, “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life”;**

yet for Nick, Gatsby also represents everything for which “I have an unaffected scorn.” Why might Gatsby be this contradiction for Nick?

**11. Almost nobody attends Gatsby’s funeral.**

Why might this be? What do we know for sure about his life? (*Trick question!*)





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