

“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding The Great Gatsby

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources,
and Historical Documents

《了不起的盖茨比》解读

[美] 多尔顿·格罗斯 (Dalton Gross) 著
玛丽琼·格罗斯 (MaryJean Gross)

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The "Literature in Context" Series

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Introduction

Very few books have haunted the American imagination like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Though it was published in 1925, both high school and college students can still relate to it, and it is very popular with teachers and professors. New biographies and critical works about Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda are published year after year. Between 1990 and 1996 alone, for example, 165 scholarly items came out about Fitzgerald and his work. Three film versions of *The Great Gatsby* have appeared: an unsuccessful silent film, a 1949 production starring Alan Ladd and Betty Field, and a 1974 version starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. This last film is remarkable for its visual interpretation of the 1920s. Seeing the lavish houses, the exotic clothes, and the expensive cars in the movie makes it easy for one to imagine how Gatsby, Daisy, and the others might look. A slowly moving film, it is nonetheless an elegant feast for the eyes.

Yet *The Great Gatsby* did not begin as a success. It sold only 25,000 copies in 1925, and very few for a long time after that. Some literary critics praised it, but the majority of newspaper reviewers were not impressed; and it went out of print in the 1930s. When Fitzgerald died in 1940, all of his books were out of print, and he was working as a Hollywood script writer. Debt-ridden, in bad health, and an alcoholic, he sometimes drunkenly accused

strangers of thinking he was dead; it seemed likely at the time that this magnificent novel would disappear from the American scene and that its author would be completely forgotten.

But editions of *The Great Gatsby* began to appear again during the 1940s, and in the 1950s a full-scale Fitzgerald revival began (a revival concentrating on *The Great Gatsby*), which now continues more enthusiastically than ever. By 1980, 8 million copies of Fitzgerald's books had been sold, and 300,000 copies of *The Great Gatsby* were selling every year. What accounts for the powerful and lasting appeal of this novel? No single book can give a complete answer to that question. We can touch on some of the reasons here, though. For one thing, we can examine Fitzgerald's brilliant craftsmanship. And we can explore the author's personal background and the backdrop of the novel, the period of American history often called the "Roaring Twenties."

At its simplest the novel is about something familiar to most readers: a disillusioning, excruciatingly painful experience with love. But it is much more than that. The love story is intertwined with the force of the American Dream, as Fitzgerald understood it and as he saw it in the colorful and violent world of the 1920s; it is also intertwined with the personal crises of the author, which are now so well known that they are almost a part of popular culture. Yet none of these things would have had much impact on the popularity of the novel if it had not been for the author's guiding talent; F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the greatest literary craftsmen that America has ever produced.

This book examines *The Great Gatsby* as a literary work. What techniques are employed? What makes the novel work? What is the overall effect on the reader? Because Fitzgerald's writing is heavily autobiographical, we will also look into the relationship between the novel and his life experiences. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald led such intriguing lives that people are sometimes inclined to pay as much attention to their personal experiences as to their writing. We will look at their lives in this book, but only in terms of their influence on Fitzgerald's fiction.

For such an easy-to-read novel, *The Great Gatsby* is very rich and complex. Our understanding of it can be deepened and enriched by looking at the historical period in which it is set. Much that was familiar to the reader of the 1920s is no longer common knowledge. Newspaper and magazine articles as well as testimony

from criminal trials and Senate hearings of the era will be used to re-create crucial aspects of the world Fitzgerald was depicting.

Because Jay Gatsby is, after all, a criminal, we will examine some of the major underworld figures and real criminal activities Fitzgerald drew on for his story, including the sort of New York night life created by Prohibition. Fitzgerald made skillful use of the scandals of the era—some briefly mentioned or just hinted at—to create the mood and tone he was seeking. Included in this book are documents on one of the worst scandals in the history of American sports, the fixing of the 1919 World Series, and on the greatest political scandal of Warren Gamaliel Harding's administration, the Teapot Dome case.

The lives of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, like the scandals of the 1920s, show how greatly values had changed since before World War I. Especially notable were changes in the social and economic roles women played and were expected to play. We will take a look at the "flapper," the newly emancipated American girl whom Fitzgerald wrote about so often that people mistakenly thought he had invented the term. *The Great Gatsby* is, in part, about marriage problems, and for that reason new attitudes toward marriage and sex will also be examined.

Fitzgerald did not think of himself as the sort of writer who set out to teach a lesson. He was concerned with telling a complicated story in a very striking way. Still, the fact remains that *The Great Gatsby* has a message. It has an impact on the thinking and value systems of its readers and makes them ask questions: What is Fitzgerald saying about the values of his society? What is he saying about the human condition? How does any of this relate to us today?

To a large extent, the answers to these questions can be found by examining *The Great Gatsby* in its literary and historical context. Quotations from *The Great Gatsby* are taken from Matthew J. Bruccoli, ed., *The Great Gatsby: The Authorized Text* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

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Literary Analysis: What Makes *The Great Gatsby* Great

The Great Gatsby is a very popular novel, and today nearly all critics agree that it is a great one. But what makes it great? What elements set it apart? Many novels are so poorly written that they are never even published, and most that are published do not sell especially well. Of those that have good sales, good reviews, or both, most are soon forgotten. But a few become a permanent part of our literature. Why has *The Great Gatsby* become one of those few?

Probably no one is able to give a complete answer to that question. The things that make a book great are subtle and complicated. Perhaps some of them are indefinable. But we can at least touch on some of the basic elements that make *The Great Gatsby* what it is and on some of the meanings it has for perceptive readers.

One can read *The Great Gatsby* easily and enjoyably without careful analysis. The essential story seems simple enough. Yet readers who stop to ask themselves exactly why they enjoyed the novel, what makes it work, will find themselves looking at a very complex book that means much more than it seems to at first glance. The novel has nearly perfect unity of effect. Every image, every character, every symbol, every turn of the plot contributes to the theme and to the feeling one carries away from reading it, even though

one may not always be consciously aware of their influence. Let us begin with an overly simplified statement of the theme: the dangerously misguided nature of Gatsby's worship of the monied world of Daisy Buchanan. As we come to see how Fitzgerald develops this theme, we will also come to see how much depth and richness it actually has.

Taken by itself, the plot is simple and bears out what has just been said about the theme of the novel in a flat, anecdotal way. Gatsby, a poor young man, falls in love with a rich girl while he is serving as an officer in the army during World War I. She loves him but marries someone else when she has given up on his coming back to her. She does not realize that he is poor. He becomes rich through bootlegging and other crimes, finds her, and tries to persuade her to leave her husband for him. She nearly does, but instead stays with her husband. She kills her husband's mistress in an automobile accident, and the dead woman's husband, deceived into thinking Gatsby is responsible, kills Gatsby and then himself. The reader is left uncertain as to what extent Gatsby's former love is involved in the deception. Gatsby has been rejected by the woman he loves and, quite possibly, betrayed by her.

But to know this is to have only the slightest inkling of what *The Great Gatsby* is all about. A good beginning point for understanding the novel is to look at how the plot unfolds through one of the chief unifying elements, the narrative point of view. Two things about the narrative structure are important here. First, everything the reader learns comes through Nick Carraway—either through Nick's own experience or what he has learned from others. Nick narrates the events of the story not in the order they occur, but in the order Fitzgerald wants them presented. Second, and at least as important, the events are described as Nick sees them. All the complex attitudes and emotions that contribute to the tone of the novel are conveyed to the reader through Nick's consciousness.

This brings us to the basic question about any first-person narrative: To what extent does the author wish us to accept the narrator's point of view? Often a writer achieves very strong effects through the contrast between what the narrator says and what the author makes the reader see. Huckleberry Finn is a classic example of this sort of narrator. Did any reader ever appreciate Emmeline Grangerford's poetry the way Huck does? Even if the narrator is intelligent, honest, and perceptive, what he sees will be colored by his own experiences and his own personality.

Does Fitzgerald, then, wish us to accept Nick's judgments? The answer to that is a qualified yes. Nick's opinions about Gatsby and the other major characters are meant to be accurate. But at the same time, as we will see later, Nick's world view does not serve him well. He calls himself honest, and, unlike many people who say that about themselves, he seems to be so. He thinks of himself as able to reserve judgment about others. He is aloof and cynical but fundamentally good-hearted. He is very intelligent and very smooth socially, with the self-confidence that comes from an established social position. All of these qualities contribute to his very highly developed moral sense.

But for all his honesty, Nick himself has been nearly destroyed by the events he relates, and his state of mind colors everything he says. He has been left lonely and directionless, with no faith in anything. To use a word that did not become popular until long after *The Great Gatsby* was written, he is alienated. Before he meets Gatsby he is already detached and at loose ends. He turns thirty in the course of the novel. He is unmarried and has no profession or specific ambition. He has come to the East with a rather lukewarm intention of going into the bond business, and has left behind a girl for whom he has no stronger feeling than friendliness to whom he wishes to avoid commitment. Like Gatsby, he has gone through World War I, a permanently disorienting experience for many men of his generation. In 1922, four years after the war, he still feels unsettled.

But his earlier basic disorientation is mild compared to the state in which he tells Gatsby's story. He has given up on the bond business and returned to the West, where he wants "no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (6). His experiences with Gatsby "temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7). In the hotel room where Tom Buchanan confronts Gatsby, Nick remembers chillingly that it is his birthday and that he is thirty, and contemplates the coming years of aging bachelorhood. He thinks for the moment that he wants Jordan Baker, but rejects her when she reacts with self-absorbed callousness to Myrtle Wilson's death. This insight into Jordan's essential selfishness completes his emotional isolation from everyone but Gatsby.

It is in this state of mind that Nick tells Gatsby's story. He rivets the reader's attention by saying that he left the East disillusioned with everything but Gatsby, yet he says Gatsby "represented every-

thing for which I have an unaffected scorn" (6). At the same time, he finds Gatsby's "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" "gorgeous" (6). Gradually the reader is led through the stages of Nick's growing knowledge of Gatsby. Gatsby is at first a fabulously rich neighbor who throws lavish, wild, glittering, chaotic parties in his mansion. The rumors about him are also wild, glittering, and chaotic: that he was a German spy and that he is a murderer.

When he meets Gatsby, Nick hears from him a preposterous version of his past life; this skewed biographical sketch is the origin of the ambivalence Nick feels. He almost laughs at Gatsby's story, but when Gatsby shows him his war medals and a picture of himself at Oxford, Nick decides the story must be true. From this point on he wishes to believe in Gatsby, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Later, when Tom Buchanan questions that Gatsby went to Oxford and Gatsby explains that as a United States Army officer he went there for a few months after the war, Nick wants to slap him on the back for justifying himself. However, the reader remembers what Nick has, ironically, forgotten—that Gatsby told him his family had gone to Oxford for generations. Gatsby is a man who says his family comes from San Francisco and says San Francisco is in the Midwest.

After hearing Gatsby's autobiography and forming a favorable opinion of him, Nick is jolted to learn that Gatsby is an associate of Meyer Wolfsheim, a man with firsthand knowledge of the death of Rosy Rosenthal, one of the most notorious of New York's gangland murders. Nick is told that Wolfsheim fixed the World Series and is "staggered" to learn that "one man could . . . play with the faith of fifty million people" (78). Here, as in fact all through the novel, American imagination and idealism have been betrayed.

Almost immediately Nick is exposed to another aspect of Gatsby, as he learns from Jordan Baker of his passionate love for Daisy Buchanan, and then sees Gatsby, in what is perhaps the most touching scene in the book, meeting Daisy again for the first time in five years, more tense, frightened, and awkward than a young boy on his first date. After relating this powerful scene, Nick tells the reader what he learned only much later—the story of Gatsby's early poverty and his experiences with Dan Cody. It is the juxtaposition of this earlier Gatsby with the later, with the sensitivities they have in common blurred and soiled by the development of a criminal personality, that gives *The Great Gatsby* some of its haunting, once-read-never-forgotten quality.

Finally, in a hotel room with Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Gatsby, Nick must face the truth. Gatsby is a large-scale criminal. He is, among other things, a bootlegger. Moreover, he sees nothing wrong with what he does. Everything readers have guessed about Gatsby is now clear. He has lied to Nick from the very beginning. Gatsby, it seems, is everything Nick disapproves of. Nick is honest and cultivated and a practitioner of the social decencies. Gatsby is a liar and a criminal. He is ignorant and without taste. He is too raw to understand that the money he acquired as a criminal does not bridge the gap between his world and that of the Buchanans. Yet for Nick his friendship with Gatsby is the only redeeming experience of his time in the East. Why?

To answer that question is to go to the very heart of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick loves Gatsby's yearning, his imaginative idealism, his reaching for some indefinable glamorous goal. Early in the novel Nick calls it "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" (6). Yet Nick despises all that Gatsby stands for. Gatsby's idealism is entirely misdirected. He worships a sort of life that he thinks comes with great wealth. To him it is a life filled with wonder, excitement, fine things, and absolute self-worth. Gatsby's vision is a crude, corrupted form of the American Dream. If one has a vast amount of money, one becomes a wonderful person and enjoys a wonderful existence. For Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan is the embodiment of that life. His failure becomes tragic as he is destroyed by what he has pursued and loved so innocently and wholeheartedly.

For Nick, and for Fitzgerald, the American Dream in his time has become a dead and hollow thing. If the goal is simply wealth, then those who have wealth should be splendid, happy people. But Nick's final judgment of the Buchanans and of Jordan Baker is devastating. He tells Gatsby, "They're a rotten crowd. . . . You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (162).

From the beginning Nick feels reservations about these people; eventually he comes to feel a deep aversion to them. Tom Buchanan is almost a caricature of the American Dream. He is wealthy and physically powerful. He has played football excellently at an Ivy League school, and he has married a beautiful woman. But he is also stupid, brutal, and bored, mouthing ideas he has stolen and cannot even remember correctly from third-rate books. Nick learns of his infidelity and watches him break his mistress' nose for mentioning Daisy's name. Nick guesses correctly that Buchanan sent the homicidally furious Wilson to Gatsby's house, knowing that he

would probably kill Gatsby. Nick finally prefers not to meet Tom again and only grudgingly shakes hands with him.

Daisy Buchanan, even more than her husband, is crucial to the meaning of the novel. Gatsby worships her, quite literally, as he stares across the water at the green light on her dock. His whole illicit career is an attempt to recapture Daisy. Yet from the beginning Nick finds her fraudulent. She tells him she finds life meaningless, not out of any real feeling, but because she thinks she is speaking what is currently in fashion. He is carried along by her beautiful, hypnotic voice, but when she finishes, he feels that she has cheated him. Daisy has not communicated. She has only performed. Later Nick says she dislikes Gatsby's parties because they are an "emotion" rather than a "gesture." It is doubtful that she would ever have confronted her husband with her love for Gatsby if Gatsby had not insisted on it. After she has rejected Gatsby for her husband, she makes no effort to save him when his life is in danger. She ignores his death and his funeral.

Nick sees all this and condemns it morally. "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy" (187). It would seem that Nick's analytical intelligence has saved him from the trap in which the unsophisticated Gatsby has been destroyed. But to read *The Great Gatsby* this way is to miss the full implications of Nick's personality—of the point of view from which the story has been told. He has, of course, escaped this trap, but he is caught in another; he has nothing left but desolation and despair. He has become the perfect person to tell Gatsby's story and to produce the mood, tone, and dimensions Fitzgerald wishes it to have. For the story is much more than a disillusionment with the pursuit of a rich girl or with the admiration of a monied class. The disillusionment is with contemporary American culture and in a sense with modern Western civilization. Perhaps the disillusionment is even cosmic.

Fitzgerald's world view in *The Great Gatsby* is, in part at least, of a piece with the spirit of the United States in the 1920s—a strange mixture of cynicism and outraged idealism, of despair and hysterical vitality. The primary reason was that the United States had just emerged from World War I, a war that had come as a surprise to most people. For the preceding two generations there had been a feeling that civilization was at last outgrowing war. Soon there would be no more wars. At the same time poets and philosophers yearned for the nobility and self-sacrifice that they believed war produced.