

THE GREAT GATSBY — STUDY GUIDE

1. Introduction

- **Author:** F. Scott Fitzgerald
 - **Published:** 1925
 - **Genre:** Modernist Novel / Tragedy
 - **Setting:** Long Island & New York City during the Roaring Twenties
 - **Premise:** The story follows the mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his obsessive pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, told through the eyes of his neighbour Nick Carraway.
 - **Why it's studied:** Rich symbolism, complex characters, themes of the American Dream, class, illusion, and moral decline.
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2. Plot Summary

Overview

Nick Carraway moves to West Egg and becomes entangled in the lives of wealthy socialites. His neighbour, Jay Gatsby, throws extravagant parties in the hope of reconnecting with Daisy Buchanan — the woman he loves but who is now married. Gatsby's dream ends tragically, revealing the emptiness beneath the glamour.

Chapter-by-Chapter Summary (Concise)

Chapters 1–2

- Nick moves to West Egg and visits Daisy and Tom Buchanan.
- Tom's affair with Myrtle Wilson is revealed.

Chapters 3–4

- Nick attends one of Gatsby's lavish parties.
- Gatsby befriends Nick and asks him to arrange a meeting with Daisy.

Chapters 5–6

- Gatsby and Daisy reunite; romance rekindles.

- Gatsby reveals his past: he reinvented himself from James Gatz to pursue wealth and status.

Chapters 7–8

- Tension peaks on a hot summer day; confrontation in New York.
- Daisy hits Myrtle with Gatsby's car.
- George Wilson, misled, shoots Gatsby and then himself.

Chapter 9

- Few attend Gatsby's funeral.
 - Nick leaves New York, disillusioned with its moral corruption.
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3. Setting & Context

1920s America

- Boom era of wealth, consumerism, glamour, and moral looseness.
- Prohibition (alcohol ban) leads to illegal trade and organised crime.

Old Money vs New Money

- **East Egg:** inherited wealth, tradition, status (Tom & Daisy).
- **West Egg:** new, self-made wealth (Gatsby).
- Conflict reflects rigid class divides.

Themes from Context

- Decay beneath apparent prosperity
 - The fragility of the American Dream
 - Gender expectations & social performance
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4. Characters

Nick Carraway

- Narrator, observant, morally reflective
- Acts as the bridge between worlds
- Both part of and critical of the society he describes

Jay Gatsby

- Enigmatic, self-created millionaire
- Obsessed with Daisy, idealistic to a fault
- Symbol of the corrupted American Dream

Daisy Buchanan

- Beautiful, charming, emotionally fragile
- Represents wealth, privilege, and unattainable ideals
- Trapped yet complicit in the harm caused

Tom Buchanan

- Arrogant, aggressive, entitled
- Represents old money, dominance, and hypocrisy

Jordan Baker

- Professional golfer, cool and detached
- Symbolises modern femininity and dishonesty

Myrtle Wilson

- Tom's mistress; desires a better life
- Represents desperation of lower classes
- Her death marks the collapse of everyone's illusions

George Wilson

- Myrtle's husband; gentle and worn down
- Represents the crushed, powerless underclass

5. Themes

The American Dream

Gatsby's journey from poverty to wealth shows the dream's seductive promise — and its ultimate emptiness and corruption.

Illusion vs Reality

Gatsby's entire identity is performance; Daisy is more fantasy than truth; the glamour of the 1920s hides moral decay.

Class & Social Barriers

Money does not equal status; Gatsby can buy luxury but not entry into Daisy's world.

Love, Obsession & Possession

Gatsby's love for Daisy is romantic but unrealistic. Tom treats her as property.

Moral Corruption

Characters lie, cheat, exploit, and escape accountability (symbolised by the empty funeral and Daisy/Tom's retreat into wealth).

Loneliness & Isolation

Despite crowds, parties, and wealth, characters remain emotionally isolated.

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- First-person retrospective narration
- Nick's biased perspective shapes the story

Structure

- Non-linear elements: flashbacks to Gatsby's past
- Builds toward confrontation in NYC
- Tragic arc following classical structure
- Circular: Nick begins & ends in the Midwest

Language

- Lyrical, poetic imagery
 - Rich symbolism (colours, locations, weather)
 - Contrast between opulence and emptiness
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7. Key Quotations

The American Dream

- "Gatsby believed in the green light..."
→ Symbol of hope and unreachable dreams.

Character Insight

- "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy..."
→ Moral judgement on the wealthy elite.

Loneliness

- "So we beat on, boats against the current..."
→ Humanity's struggle against time and fate.

Illusion

- "Her voice was full of money."
→ Daisy represents wealth, allure, and privilege.

Gatsby's Reinvention

- "The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg... sprang from his Platonic conception of himself."
→ Identity built on imagination and aspiration.
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

The Green Light

- Gatsby's hope and unattainable dream
- Symbol of longing and illusion

The Eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg

- Watchfulness, judgement, spiritual emptiness
- Moral decay of the world

The Valley of Ashes

- Poverty, industrial decay, exploitation
- The price of the glamorous lifestyle

Colour Symbolism

- **Gold:** wealth, glamour
- **White:** superficial purity
- **Yellow:** corruption under the surface

Weather

- Heat symbolises tension (hotel confrontation)
 - Rain mirrors emotions (reunion scene)
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9. Important Scenes

- Gatsby's parties
- Reunion with Daisy
- Plaza Hotel confrontation
- Myrtle's death
- Gatsby's murder
- Nick's closing reflections

Each scene builds the contrast between appearance and reality.

10. Writer's Purpose

Fitzgerald critiques:

- the emptiness of the American Dream
 - the superficiality and destructiveness of wealth
 - class prejudice and social stagnation
 - the human tendency to cling to illusions
 - the moral decay hidden behind glamour
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Fitzgerald present the corruption of the American Dream?
 - **Character:** Examine Gatsby as a tragic hero.
 - **Setting:** Explore how setting emphasises class divisions.
 - **Symbolism:** Discuss the significance of the green light.
 - **Turning Point:** Analyse the importance of the confrontation in the Plaza Hotel.
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Fitzgerald uses setting to highlight rigid class divisions.

Evidence: East Egg is “the white palaces of fashionable East Egg,” contrasted with West Egg’s “less fashionable” imitation.

Analysis: The contrast shows that wealth alone cannot bridge the social gap — Gatsby’s new money lacks the heritage and legitimacy valued by Daisy’s world. This reinforces the hopelessness of Gatsby’s dream.

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** American Dream, illusion vs reality, class, love, corruption
- **Symbols:** green light, eyes of Eckleburg, ash heaps, colour symbolism
- **Characters:** Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Nick, Jordan, Myrtle
- **Essential quotes:**
 - “Gatsby believed in the green light...”
 - “Her voice was full of money.”
 - “They were careless people...”
 - “So we beat on...”
- **Turning points:** reunion, Plaza confrontation, Myrtle’s death

MINI-ESSAYS

Character: Gatsby as the American Dream Myth

Gatsby embodies both the allure and the delusion of the American Dream. His rise from “James Gatz” to wealthy socialite seems to affirm self-creation, yet Fitzgerald layers irony into every aspect of Gatsby’s success. His mansion, parties, and wealth are imitations—spectacle designed to impress Daisy, not fulfil personal ambition. Gatsby’s tragedy lies in his idealism: he believes he can “repeat the past,” treating love as a goal to be earned through performance. Fitzgerald contrasts Gatsby’s romantic intensity with the moral emptiness of the Buchanans, whose carelessness destroys him. The symbolic **green light** reveals Gatsby’s longing for a dream perpetually out of reach—hope that drives but never satisfies. His criminal income exposes the rot beneath the glitter; in a corrupted society, even dreams must be bought through corruption. Nick’s conflicted admiration shows the complexity of Gatsby: not a fool, but a believer in a dream too fragile for the world he inhabits. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby’s rise and fall to critique a nation where aspiration has been replaced by acquisition and where idealism is crushed by privilege.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: The Plaza Hotel Confrontation

At the Plaza, Gatsby’s insistence that Daisy “never loved” Tom meets the immovable reality of time: love cannot be edited like a ledger. When Daisy falters, Gatsby’s myth collapses; the subsequent hit-and-run cements moral chaos. The scene ends the fantasy of restoration and begins the reckoning that leads to Gatsby’s isolation and death.

B. Symbolism: Green Light, Valley of Ashes, Dr T. J. Eckleburg

- **Green light:** vector of longing—hope made visible yet unreachable.
- **Valley of Ashes:** waste of modern wealth—moral and industrial residue.
- **Eckleburg’s eyes:** a god of advertising; judgment without justice.

C. Setting Analysis

Long Island’s **East/West Egg** geography encodes class—old money insulating itself from the nouveau riche. Manhattan is transactional speed; the Valley is its cost. Time (the 1920s) functions as a setting too: prohibition glamour masking rot.