

The Great Gatsby is a short yet concentrated novel. Its success can be measured in terms of its popularity, the ready availability of several inexpensive paperback editions, and the fact that it has been adapted as a Hollywood movie on three occasions (in 1926, 1949, and 1974). On the most straightforward level it can be read as a love story, the tale of a man's obsessive desire for the woman he has lost and the tragic consequences of that desire. On another level it is a social satire, mocking the follies of contemporary social life, the shallowness, hypocrisy and greed that F. Scott Fitzgerald recognised in America in the years following the First World War. On a superficial level you could say that The Great Gatsby is a love story, or simply about friendship or ambition. But the novel's relationship to various historical and cultural contexts makes it a complex work, so Nick's account of Gatsby's desire for Daisy is rich in interpretative possibilities. One of its moral lessons is that the wealth/money is not the main reason behind happiness in life. How many rich people live miserable lives.

General Synoptic Outlines of the Novel:

- ✓ Nick Carraway narrates
- ✓ Love and marriage
- ✓ Possession and desire
- ✓ Tom's affair with Myrtle
- ✓ Gatsby the bootlegger
- ✓ The death of Myrtle Wilson
- ✓ The death of Jay Gatsby
- ✓ Nick returns to the Midwest

Summary of Chapter 1:

Nick Carraway begins his narration, introducing himself and the novel's other major character: Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Nick's mysterious neighbour, Jay Gatsby.

Nick Carraway has returned to the Midwest, and is writing a book about events which occurred during a period he spent on the East Coast of America. He begins his narration with some self-analysis, trying to pin down pertinent aspects of his own character. He recalls his father's advice to show tolerance towards others, and to reserve judgement, adding that 'Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope' (p. 7).

Nick refers to Gatsby as 'the man who gives his name to this book' (p. 8), and he displays a certain ambivalence in his dedication to that man's memory. He is scornful of certain aspects of Gatsby's character and behaviour, but for others—his 'heightened sensitivity to the promises of life' and his 'extraordinary gift for hope' (p. 8)—he has unqualified admiration.

Nick says a little about his family, claiming descent from the dukes of Buccleuch, although his father runs the hardware business set up by his grandfather's brother at time of the American Civil War (1861-5), in which he avoided service. Nick, on the other hand, was caught up in the First World War (1914-18), and that has caused considerable disruption in his life. On his return from Europe, he found that the Midwest, which was once 'the warm centre of the world', now seemed 'the ragged edge of the universe' (p. 9).

Moving to Long Island, New York, in 1922, Nick settles in West Egg, a suburban 'village' (p. 9). Nick's neighbour, Jay Gatsby, lives in a mansion. Generally, Nick finds himself living with 'the consoling proximity of millionaires', and in nearby East Egg there are 'white palaces' (p. 11).

Nick tells of a visit to the house of Tom Buchanan, an acquaintance from Yale University, and his wife, Daisy, Nick's second cousin once removed. Buchanan is physically powerful and extremely wealthy. Nick meets Daisy's friend Jordan Baker, who is a golfer.

Tom makes racist comments, drawing support for his views from a recently published book, Goddard's *The Rise of the Coloured Empire*. Jordan tells Nick that Tom is having an affair with 'some woman in New York' (p. 20). This mistress is responsible for a telephone call during dinner.

Later, in the moonlight, Nick catches his first glimpse of Gatsby, gazing as if transfixed by a green light at the end of the Buchanans' book.

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Commentary

Right at the start of his narration Nick talks about advice he received from his father. Jay Gatsby, we later find out, has turned his back on his parents and has found a very different role model in Dan Cody, his ‘mentor’. An important theme in *The Great Gatsby* is the relationship of the past to the present, including what is handed on from one generation to the next. This may take the form of material wealth, but it may also be a set of values, attitudes or expectations.

*James Gatz breaks away from his past and becomes Jay Gatsby. You might compare this with the way the American colonies broke away from the British Empire. America's Declaration of Independence, issued on 4 July 1776, proclaimed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'.

War and peace:

Nick's great-uncle avoided fighting in the American Civil War (1861-5), and managed to build up a thriving business. Nick and Gatsby, on the other hand, served in the First World War in Europe, after America had joined the conflict in 1917. Gatsby was promoted to the rank of major, an advance in social status that enabled him to make useful connections on the way avoid war. In that respect it had clearly failed.

Names and their meaning:

Daisy's name evokes a delicate white flower. Nick actually remarks that Daisy opens up 'in a flower-like way' (p. 24). Is this simile convincing? Daisy's life seems to be led in an entirely artificial world of wealth and luxury. She seems far removed from the natural world.

Myrtle, who appears in the next chapter, also has a plant's name. In contrast to the delicate daisy, the myrtle is a rather hardy shrub. This plant name seems to suit the tough conditions of Myrtle Wilson's life. But note that, in Mediterranean cultures, myrtle has been associated with love; in the ancient world, myrtle was considered to be sacred to Venus, the goddess of love. Myrtle is, of course, Tom Buchanan's mistress.

Note that Carraway, when spelt 'caraway', is the name of a tall, yellowish plant with thin leaves and seeds that are widely used in cooking. Does this detail tell us anything about Nick? The homely name Carraway certainly seems to place him at a distance from the upper-class dukes of Buccleuch. Buchanan, on the other hand, is actually the name of a Scottish clan who own land near Loch Lomond, in Stirlingshire.