

The American Dream

The American Dream refers to a shared set of ideals that guide the spirit of the United States. These shared ideals include a notion of freedom that ensures all Americans the possibility of upward social mobility, as long as they work for it. Every character in *The Great Gatsby* draws inspiration from the American Dream's promise of wealth and prosperity. At the same time, the novel itself critiques the notion of the American Dream. Readers may end the novel wondering if the American Dream is actually attainable at all. Gatsby suffers the most from the promise of social mobility inherent to the American Dream. He spends his life believing that if he makes enough money and acquires enough possessions, he can transcend his lower-class birth and become equal to Daisy and Tom. However, even though Gatsby succeeds in acquiring wealth, he is never accepted by the upper class. Gatsby's failure to attain the American Dream suggests the Dream is both an unattainable and unwise goal.

The Decline of the American Dream in the 1920s

On the surface, *The Great Gatsby* is a story of the thwarted love between a man and a woman. The main theme of the novel, however, encompasses a much larger, less romantic scope. Though all of its action takes place over a mere few months during the summer of 1922 and is set in a circumscribed geographical area in the vicinity of Long Island, New York, *The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American dream in an era of unprecedented prosperity and material excess.

Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. The reckless jubilation that led to decadent parties and wild jazz music—epitomized in *The Great Gatsby* by the opulent parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday night—resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals.

When World War I ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the Victorian social morality of early-twentieth-century America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The dizzying rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the war led to a sudden, sustained increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism, as people began to spend and consume at unprecedented levels. A person from any social background could, potentially, make a fortune, but the American aristocracy—families with old wealth—scorned the newly rich industrialists and speculators. Additionally, the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, which banned the sale of alcohol, created a thriving underworld designed to satisfy the massive demand for bootleg liquor among rich and poor alike.

Fitzgerald positions the characters of *The Great Gatsby* as emblems of these social trends. Nick and Gatsby, both of whom fought in World War I, exhibit the newfound cosmopolitanism and cynicism that resulted from the war. The various social climbers and ambitious speculators who attend Gatsby's parties evidence the greedy scramble for wealth. The clash between "old money" and "new money" manifests itself in the novel's symbolic geography: East Egg represents the established aristocracy, West Egg the self-made rich. Meyer Wolfsheim and Gatsby's fortune symbolize the rise of organized crime and bootlegging.

As Fitzgerald saw it (and as Nick explains in Chapter 9), the American dream was originally about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. In the 1920s depicted in the novel, however, easy money and relaxed social values have corrupted this dream, especially on the East Coast. The main plotline of the novel reflects this assessment, as Gatsby's dream of loving Daisy is ruined by the difference in their respective social statuses, his resorting to crime to make enough money to impress her, and the rampant materialism that characterizes her lifestyle.

Additionally, places and objects in *The Great Gatsby* have meaning only because characters instill them with meaning: the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg best exemplify this idea. In Nick's mind, the ability to create meaningful symbols constitutes a central component of the American dream, as early Americans invested their new nation with their own ideals and values. Nick compares the green bulk of America rising from the ocean to the green light at the end of Daisy's dock.

Just as Americans have given America meaning through their dreams for their own lives, Gatsby instills Daisy with a kind of idealized perfection that she neither deserves nor possesses. Gatsby's dream is ruined by the unworthiness of its object, just as the American dream in the 1920s is ruined by the unworthiness of its object—money and pleasure. Like 1920s Americans in general, fruitlessly seeking a bygone era in which their dreams had value, Gatsby longs to re-create a vanished past—his time in Louisville with Daisy—but is incapable of doing so. When his dream crumbles, all that is left for Gatsby to do is die; all Nick can do is move back to Minnesota, where American values have not decayed.

The Hollowness of the Upper Class

One of the major topics explored in *The Great Gatsby* is the sociology of wealth, specifically, how the newly minted millionaires of the 1920s differ from and relate to the old aristocracy of the country's richest families. In the novel, West Egg and its denizens represent the newly rich, while East Egg and its denizens, especially Daisy and Tom, represent the old aristocracy. Fitzgerald portrays the newly rich as being vulgar, gaudy, ostentatious, and lacking in social graces and taste. Gatsby, for example, lives in a monstrously ornate mansion, wears a pink suit, drives a Rolls-Royce, and does not pick up on subtle social signals, such as the insincerity of the Sloanes' invitation to lunch. In contrast, the old aristocracy possesses grace, taste, subtlety, and elegance, epitomized by the Buchanans' tasteful home and the flowing white dresses of Daisy and Jordan Baker.

What the old aristocracy possesses in taste, however, it seems to lack in heart, as the East Eggers prove themselves careless, inconsiderate bullies who are so used to money's ability to ease their minds that they never worry about hurting others. The Buchanans exemplify this stereotype when, at the end of the novel, they simply move to a new house far away rather than condescend to attend Gatsby's funeral. Gatsby, on the other hand, whose recent wealth derives from criminal activity, has a sincere and loyal heart, remaining outside Daisy's window until four in the morning in Chapter 7 simply to make sure that Tom does not hurt her. Ironically, Gatsby's good qualities (loyalty and love) lead to his death, as he takes the blame for killing Myrtle rather than letting Daisy be punished, and the Buchanans' bad qualities (fickleness and selfishness) allow them to remove themselves from the tragedy not only physically but psychologically.

Class

In the monied world of *The Great Gatsby*, class influences all aspects of life, and especially love. Myrtle mentions this with regard to her husband, George, whom she mistook for someone of better “breeding” and hence greater prospects: “I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe.” Similarly, Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy is bound up with class. Only after amassing a large fortune does he feel able to make his move. At the end of the book, class dynamics dictate which marriage survives (Tom and Daisy), which one is destroyed (George and Myrtle), and which one will never come to be (Gatsby and Daisy). Only the most affluent couple pulls through the events that conclude the book. In fact, it seems that the accident may have brought them closer. When Nick spies on them through the window, he reports that “there was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.” Because of their elite class status, Tom and Daisy share a belief that they are immune to the consequences of their actions. In the final chapter, Nick calls Tom and Daisy “careless people” who “smashed up things and . . . let other people clean up the mess they had made.”

Love and Marriage

The ideals of love and marriage are profoundly strained in *The Great Gatsby*, a book that centers on two loveless marriages: the union between Tom and Daisy Buchanan and between George and Myrtle Wilson. In both cases, the marriages seem to be unions of convenience or advantage than actual love. Myrtle explains that she married George because she thought he was “a gentleman,” suggesting she hoped he’d raise her class status. Daisy nearly backed out of her marriage to Tom the day before her wedding, and Tom had an affair within a year of the wedding, but the couple is well-suited because of their shared class and desire for fun and material possessions. Even Gatsby’s all-consuming passion for Daisy seems more of a desire to possess something unattainable than actual love. Nick, meanwhile, dates Jordan Baker throughout the book, and though their relationship has its moments of warmth and kindness, both parties generally seem lukewarm and emotionally distant. “I wasn’t actually in love,” Nick recalls, “but I felt a sort of tender curiosity.” Such “tender curiosity” may be the closest thing to love in the entire novel.

The Green Light

Situated at the end of Daisy’s East Egg dock and barely visible from Gatsby’s West Egg lawn, the green light represents Gatsby’s hopes and dreams for the future. Gatsby associates it with Daisy, and in Chapter 1 he reaches toward it in the darkness as a guiding light to lead him to his goal. Because Gatsby’s quest for Daisy is broadly associated with the American dream, the green light also symbolizes that more generalized ideal. In Chapter 9, Nick compares the green light to how America, rising out of the ocean, must have looked to early settlers of the new nation.

The Valley of Ashes

First introduced in Chapter 2, the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City consists of a long stretch of desolate land created by the dumping of industrial ashes. It represents the moral and social decay that results from the uninhibited pursuit of wealth, as the rich indulge themselves

with regard for nothing but their own pleasure. The valley of ashes also symbolizes the plight of the poor, like George Wilson, who live among the dirty ashes and lose their vitality as a result.

The Eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are a pair of fading, bespectacled eyes painted on an old advertising billboard over the valley of ashes. They may represent God staring down upon and judging American society as a moral wasteland, though the novel never makes this point explicitly. Instead, throughout the novel, Fitzgerald suggests that symbols only have meaning because characters instill them with meaning. The connection between the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg and God exists only in George Wilson's grief-stricken mind. This lack of concrete significance contributes to the unsettling nature of the image. Thus, the eyes also come to represent the essential meaninglessness of the world and the arbitrariness of the mental process by which people invest objects with meaning. Nick explores these ideas in Chapter 8, when he imagines Gatsby's final thoughts as a depressed consideration of the emptiness of symbols and dreams.

The Automobile

In the novel, Gatsby's stunningly beautiful Rolls-Royce and other automobiles are at least superficially offered up as a symbol of modern progress and ingenuity. However, in almost every chapter, fancy cars are shown to represent danger and destruction. These incidents include the car crash by the drunken party-goer outside of Gatsby's mansion, Nick and Gatsby's joy ride over the Queensborough Bridge, and—most significantly—Myrtle being run over by Gatsby's car leading to her death, as well as (ultimately) the deaths of George Wilson and Gatsby himself.

Gatsby's character as Nick perceives him throughout the novel. What makes Gatsby "great"?

In one sense, the title of the novel is ironic; the title character is neither "great" nor named Gatsby. He is a criminal whose real name is James Gatz, and the life he has created for himself is an illusion. By the same token, the title of the novel refers to the theatrical skill with which Gatsby makes this illusion seem real: the moniker "the Great Gatsby" suggests the sort of vaudeville billing that would have been given to an acrobat, an escape artist, or a magician.

Nick is particularly taken with Gatsby and considers him a great figure. He sees both the extraordinary quality of hope that Gatsby possesses and his idealistic dream of loving Daisy in a perfect world. Though Nick recognizes Gatsby's flaws the first time he meets him, he cannot help but admire Gatsby's brilliant smile, his romantic idealization of Daisy, and his yearning for the future. The private Gatsby who stretches his arms out toward the green light on Daisy's dock seems somehow more real than the vulgar, social Gatsby who wears a pink suit to his party and calls everyone "old sport."

Nick alone among the novel's characters recognizes that Gatsby's love for Daisy has less to do with Daisy's inner qualities than with Gatsby's own. That is, Gatsby makes Daisy his dream because his heart demands a dream, not because Daisy truly deserves the passion that Gatsby feels for her. Further, Gatsby impresses Nick with his power to make his dreams come true—as a child he

dreamed of wealth and luxury, and he has attained them, albeit through criminal means. As a man, he dreams of Daisy, and for a while he wins her, too.

In a world without a moral center, in which attempting to fulfill one's dreams is like rowing a boat against the current, Gatsby's power to dream lifts him above the meaningless and amoral pleasure-seeking of New York society. In Nick's view, Gatsby's capacity to dream makes him "great" despite his flaws and eventual undoing.

What is Nick like as a narrator? Is he a reliable storyteller, or does his version of events seem suspect? How do his qualities as a character affect his narration?

Nick's description of himself in the opening chapter holds true throughout the novel: he is tolerant and slow to judge, someone with whom people feel comfortable sharing their secrets. His willingness to describe himself and the contours of his thoughts even when they are inconsistent or incomplete—his conflicted feelings about Gatsby, for instance, or the long musing at the end of the novel—makes him seem trustworthy and thoughtful.

Nick's position in relation to the other characters gives him a perfect vantage point from which to tell the story—he is Daisy's cousin, Tom's old college friend, and Gatsby's neighbor, and all three trust and rely on him. Though Nick participates in this story and its events certainly affect him, *The Great Gatsby* is not really his story in the sense of being about him. However, it is his story in the sense that it is of crucial importance to him: he defines himself in the process of writing it. Indeed, he struggles with the story's meaning even as he tells it.

Though Nick professes to admire Gatsby's passion as a lover and a dreamer, Nick's own actions in his relationship with Jordan Baker cast an ironic pall over his admiration: with Jordan, Nick is guarded, cautious, and skeptical. Overall, Nick suggests that Gatsby is an exception to his usual ways of understanding and judging the world, and that his attraction to Gatsby creates a conflict within himself.

What are some of *The Great Gatsby's* most important symbols? What does the novel have to say about the role of symbols in life?

Apart from geographic locations, the two most important symbols in the novel are the green light at the end of Daisy's dock and the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The first is a perfect example of the manner in which characters in *The Great Gatsby* infuse symbols with meaning—the green light is only a green light, but to Gatsby it becomes the embodiment of his dream for the future, and it beckons to him in the night like a vision of the fulfillment of his desires. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg work in the same fashion, although their meaning is less fixed. Until George Wilson decides that they are the eyes of God, representing a moral imperative on which he must act, the eyes are simply an unsettling, unexplained image, as they stare down over the valley of ashes. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg thus emphasize the lack of a fixed relationship between symbols and what they symbolize: the eyes could mean anything to any observer, but they tend to make observers feel as though they are the ones being scrutinized. They seem to stare down at the world blankly, without the need for meaning that drives the human characters of the novel.

In general, symbols in the novel are intimately connected to dreams: Gatsby's dream of Daisy causes him to associate her image with everything he values, just as he associates the green light with his dream for the future. In reading and interpreting *The Great Gatsby*, it is at least as important to consider how characters think about symbols as it is to consider the qualities of the symbols themselves.

What role does setting play in *The Great Gatsby*? How does geography in the novel influence its themes and characters?

Each of the four important geographical locations in the novel—East Egg, West Egg, the valley of ashes, and New York City—corresponds to a particular theme or type of character encountered in the story. West Egg is like Gatsby, full of garish extravagance, symbolizing the emergence of the new rich alongside the established aristocracy of the 1920s. East Egg is like the Buchanans, wealthy, possessing high social status, and powerful, symbolizing the old upper class that continued to dominate the American social landscape. The valley of ashes is like George Wilson, desolate, desperate, and utterly without hope, symbolizing the moral decay of American society hidden by the glittering surface of upper-class extravagance. New York City is simply chaos, an abundant swell of variety and life, associated with the “quality of distortion” that Nick perceives in the East.

Setting is extremely important to *The Great Gatsby*, as it reinforces the themes and character traits that drive the novel's critical events. Even the weather matches the flow of the plot. Gatsby's reunion with Daisy begins in a ferocious thunderstorm and reaches its happiest moment just as the sun comes out. Tom's confrontation with Gatsby occurs on the hottest day of the summer. Finally, Gatsby's death occurs just as autumn creeps into the air. The specificity of the settings in *The Great Gatsby* contributes greatly to the creation of distinct zones in which the conflicting values of various characters are forced to confront each other.