

THE GREAT GATSBY

by F. Scott Fitzgerald



THE AUTHOR

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, the namesake and second cousin three times removed of the author of the National Anthem. Fitzgerald's given names indicate his parents' pride in his father's ancestry. His father, Edward, was from Maryland, with an allegiance to the Old South and its values. Fitzgerald's mother, Mary (Mollie) McQuillan, was the daughter of an Irish immigrant who became wealthy as a wholesale grocer in St. Paul. Both were Catholics.

During 1911-1913 he attended the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in New Jersey, where he met Father Sigourney Fay, who encouraged his ambitions for personal distinction and achievement. As a member of the Princeton Class of 1917, Fitzgerald neglected his studies for his literary apprenticeship. He wrote the scripts and lyrics for the Princeton Triangle Club musicals and was a contributor to the Princeton Tiger humor magazine and the Nassau Literary Magazine. On academic probation and unlikely to graduate, Fitzgerald joined the army in 1917 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry. Convinced that he would die in the war, he rapidly wrote a novel, *The Romantic Egotist*, which, after being rejected twice, was published in 1919 as *This Side of Paradise*.

In June 1918 Fitzgerald was assigned to Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama. There he fell in love with a celebrated belle, eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre, the youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. The war ended just before he was to be sent overseas; after his discharge in 1919 he went to New York City to seek his fortune in order to marry. Unwilling to wait while Fitzgerald succeeded in the advertisement business and unwilling to live on his small salary, Zelda broke their engagement.

In the fall-winter of 1919 Fitzgerald commenced his career as a writer of stories for the mass-circulation magazines. *The Saturday Evening Post* became Fitzgerald's best story market. His early commercial stories about young love introduced a fresh character: the independent, determined young American woman who appeared in "The Offshore Pirate" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." Fitzgerald's more ambitious stories, such as "May Day" and "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," were published in *The Smart Set*, which had a small circulation.

The publication of *This Side of Paradise* on March 26, 1920, made the twenty-four-year-old Fitzgerald famous almost overnight, and a week later he married Zelda in New York. They embarked on an extravagant life as young celebrities. Fitzgerald endeavored to earn a solid literary reputation but his playboy image impeded the proper assessment of his work. After a riotous summer in Westport, Connecticut, the Fitzgeralds took an apartment in New York City. When Zelda became pregnant they took their first trip to Europe in 1921 and then settled in St. Paul for the birth of their only child. Frances Scott (Scottie) Fitzgerald was born in October 1921.

Fitzgerald expected to become affluent from his play, *The Vegetable*; in the fall of 1922 they moved to Great Neck, Long Island, in order to be near Broadway. The political satire - subtitled "From President to Postman" - failed at its tryout in November 1923, and Fitzgerald wrote his way out of debt with short stories. The distractions of Great Neck and New York prevented Fitzgerald from making progress on his third novel. During this time his drinking increased. Fitzgerald was an alcoholic, but he wrote sober. Zelda regularly got "tight," but she was not an alcoholic. There were frequent domestic rows, usually triggered by drinking bouts.

Literary opinion makers were reluctant to accord Fitzgerald full marks as a serious craftsman. His reputation as a drinker inspired the myth that he was an irresponsible writer; yet he was a painstaking reviser whose fiction went through layers of drafts. The chief theme of Fitzgerald's work is aspiration - the idealism he regarded as defining American character. Another major theme was mutability or loss. As a social historian Fitzgerald became identified with "The Jazz Age": "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

The Fitzgeralds went to France in the spring of 1924 seeking tranquillity for his work. He wrote *The Great Gatsby* during the summer and fall in Valescure near St. Raphael, but the marriage was damaged by Zelda's involvement with a French naval aviator. The extent of the affair - if it was in fact consummated - is not known. The Fitzgeralds spent the winter of 1924-1925 in Rome, where he revised *The Great Gatsby*; they were en route to Paris when the novel was published in April. *The Great Gatsby* marked a striking advance in Fitzgerald's technique, utilizing a complex structure and a controlled narrative point of view. Fitzgerald's achievement received critical praise, but sales of *Gatsby* were disappointing, though the stage and movie rights brought additional income. Meanwhile, Zelda's unconventional behavior became increasingly eccentric. In April 1930 she suffered her first breakdown. Zelda was treated at Prangins clinic in Switzerland until September 1931, while Fitzgerald lived in Swiss hotels. Work on his next novel was again suspended as he wrote short stories to pay for psychiatric treatment.

The Fitzgeralds returned to America in the fall of 1931 and rented a house in Montgomery. Fitzgerald made a second unsuccessful trip to Hollywood in 1931. Zelda suffered a relapse in February 1932 and entered Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. She spent the rest of her life as a resident or outpatient of sanitariums. Fitzgerald rented a house outside Baltimore, where he completed his fourth novel, *Tender Is the Night*. Published in 1934, his most ambitious novel was a commercial failure, and its merits were matters of critical dispute. Set in France during the 1920s, *Tender Is the Night* examines the deterioration of Dick Diver, a brilliant American psychiatrist, during the course of his marriage to a wealthy mental patient.

Fitzgerald went to Hollywood alone in the summer of 1937, where he fell in love with movie columnist Sheilah Graham. Their relationship endured despite his benders. After MGM dropped his option at the end of 1938, Fitzgerald worked as a freelance script writer and wrote short-short stories for *Esquire*. He began his Hollywood novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, in 1939 and had written more than half of a working draft when he died of a heart attack in Graham's apartment on December 21, 1940. Zelda Fitzgerald perished in a fire in Highland Hospital in 1948.

PLOT SUMMARY

Nick Carraway, a young man from Minnesota, moves to New York in the summer of 1922 to learn about the bond business. He rents a house in the West Egg district of Long Island, a wealthy but unfashionable area home to the *new* rich, a group who have made their fortunes too recently to have established social connections, and who love garish displays of wealth and opulence. Nick's next-door neighbor on West Egg is a mysterious man named Jay Gatsby, who lives in a giant Gothic mansion and throws extravagant parties every Saturday night.

Nick is not like the other inhabitants of West Egg - he was educated at Yale and has social connections in East Egg, a fashionable area of Long Island home to the established members of the high upper class. Nick drives out to East Egg one evening for dinner with his cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom, a former friend of Nick's at Yale. They introduce him to Jordan Baker, a beautiful, cynical young golfer with whom Nick begins a romantic relationship. Nick also learns a bit about Daisy and Tom's marriage; Jordan tells him that Tom has a lover, Myrtle Wilson, who lives in the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City.

As the summer progresses, Nick learns more about his mysterious neighbor Gatsby - Gatsby knew Daisy in Louisville in 1917, and is deeply in love with her; he spends many nights staring at the green light and the end of her dock, across the bay from his mansion. His extravagant lifestyle and wild parties are simply an attempt to impress her. Nick arranges for Daisy and Gatsby to reunite, rekindling their love, and they begin an affair.

Tom finds out about Daisy's infidelity, and confronts Gatsby in a suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Tom asserts that he and Daisy have a history that Gatsby could never understand, and announces to his wife that Gatsby is a criminal - his fortune comes from bootlegging illegal alcohol and other criminal activities. Daisy realizes that her allegiance is to Tom, and Tom contemptuously sends her back to East Egg with Gatsby.

When Nick, Jordan, and Tom drive through the valley of ashes, however, they discover that Gatsby's car has struck and killed Tom's lover, Myrtle Wilson. They rush back to Long Island, where Nick learns from Gatsby that Daisy was driving the car when it struck Myrtle, but that Gatsby intends to take the blame. He next day, Tom tells Myrtle's husband George that Gatsby was the driver of the car; George finds Gatsby in the pool at his mansion, shoots him dead, and then turns the gun on himself.

Nick stages a small funeral for Gatsby, ends his relationship with Jordan, then moves back to the Midwest to escape the disgust he feels with the characters surrounding Gatsby. Nick disapproves of Gatsby's life, but finds beauty in the hope with which Gatsby pursued his dream.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Nick Carraway - The narrator; Nick is a young man from Minnesota who, after being educated at Yale and serving in World War I, moves East to learn the bond business in New York. Describing himself as honest and tolerant, he makes friends easily and, after settling in West Egg on Long Island, becomes the confidant of Jay Gatsby.
- Jay Gatsby - A fabulously wealthy young man living in a huge mansion in West Egg, his past is mysterious, though as the novel unfolds it becomes clear that he comes from humble beginnings in North Dakota and has made his fortune by questionable, if not criminal, means. He had a brief affair with Daisy in Louisville while in the army five years before, and he has dedicated his life to the accumulation of wealth in order to win her back.
- Daisy Buchanan - Nick's cousin, she promised to wait for Gatsby when he went off to war, but was unable to resist the wealth of Tom Buchanan. The Buchanans live in fashionable East Egg, but their marriage has been poisoned by Tom's brutality and many affairs. Daisy is a beautiful, shallow woman who needs to be loved, but has no sense of morality. She resumes her affair with Gatsby, but drops him when she finds out about his criminal activities.
- Tom Buchanan - Daisy's husband, and an acquaintance of Nick at Yale. Powerful, athletic, and angry, Tom reached the glory days of his life as a football star in college. He has become a philanderer and a racist, but is outraged when he finds out about Daisy's affair with Gatsby.
- Jordan Baker - Daisy's friend, a professional golfer, with whom Nick becomes romantically involved as the story progresses. She is beautiful, wealthy, self-centered, and dishonest.
- Myrtle Wilson - Tom's mistress, and the wife of a dull and lifeless garage owner in the valley of ashes. She is bold and vivacious, and desperate to escape from the tedium of her life. Her death in a hit-and-run accident triggers the denouement of the novel.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if her were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the ‘creative temperament’ - it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.” (Nick, p.6)

“No - Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.” (Nick, p.6-7).

“Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.” (Nick, p.64)

“The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God - a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that - and he must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar meretricious beauty.” (Nick, p.104)

“For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing.” (Nick, p.105)

“‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” (Gatsby, p.116)

“And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” (Nick, p.189)

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” (Nick, p.189)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The Great War left the young disillusioned - society as they knew it, with the old values, had crumbled in the wreckage of pointless carnage. The Roaring Twenties, portrayed in both *The Great Gatsby* and *Brideshead Revisited*, ushered in an era of hedonistic dissipation and meaninglessness. But the perspectives of the two novels are very different. While *The Great Gatsby* asks the questions, *Brideshead Revisited* answers them.
2. Nick Carraway describes himself in the following words: “Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.” Is this an accurate assessment of his character, or is he as morally bankrupt as the people he professes to despise?
3. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg represent the unseeing god of the materialistic universe of the Roaring Twenties - a god who looks down upon the evil done by men and does nothing because he is able to do nothing.

4. *The Great Gatsby* is often interpreted as an indictment of the failure of the American Dream - an interpretation underscored by Nick's closing words at the end of the book. Has the American Dream failed, or is it an unworthy vision that is best abandoned by sensible people?
5. Literary critic Marius Bewley said, "Historically, the American Dream is anti-Calvinistic, and believes in the goodness of nature and man. It is accordingly a product of the frontier West rather than the Puritan tradition." Is Bewley correct, and if so is the unrealistic nature of Gatsby's overarching vision something that a Christian should recognize as obvious? Use the description of the American Dream contained in the novel to respond to Bewley's quotation.
6. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus summarized his understanding of reality as being in constant flux by saying that "you can never step into the same river twice." To what extent does *The Great Gatsby* affirm the philosophy of Heraclitus?
7. Do you agree or disagree that Jay Gatsby, like Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha*, is ennobled by his quest to "dream the impossible dream" and "reach the unreachable star," even though the dream after which he seeks never existed in the past, nor could it ever be realized in the ugliness of the present world, or even in the foreseeable future?
8. For Jay Gatsby, it mattered little that the object of his affections was unworthy - after all, Daisy was a fickle lover, an unfaithful wife, and ultimately a woman guilty of vehicular homicide who quite willingly concealed her role in the crime. She was, as Nick said, "careless." The Dream was what mattered, and that Dream needed a material incarnation to which to attach itself. Why did it make no difference to Gatsby that there was little correspondence between the Dream and reality?
9. F. Scott Fitzgerald could have given no more deadly critique of the Jazz Age than this - that while the Beatific Vision of the medieval mystics involved a glimpse into the Divine, and thus was rooted in the Absolute, the Ideal of *The Great Gatsby* has no absolute referent, but seeks nothing more than a "vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty."
10. Do you agree or disagree that while F. Scott Fitzgerald may have turned away from his Catholic upbringing after graduating from Princeton University, *The Great Gatsby* reveals him to be an atheist desperately in search of a vision of the Divine?
11. Literary critic Chris Fitter sees Fitzgerald as betraying his earlier socialist sympathies in *The Great Gatsby*. "Temperamentally incapable of identifying with the poor because of their unpoetical indigence, the surreal aesthetic destitution imposed by poverty, Fitzgerald sides, to the end, with the exploitative, privileged magic of a glamour whose conditions he had so lucidly demystified." Do you agree or disagree? Defend your position.
12. F. Scott Fitzgerald openly admitted that he was influenced by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. In what ways is the influence evident? Be specific.

13. Many have noticed the stylistic similarities between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*. In what ways did Fitzgerald learn from and borrow the narrative techniques he learned from reading Conrad's novel?
14. Discuss the following: "While F. Scott Fitzgerald was a lapsed Catholic, Joseph Conrad was an atheist. The difference in their religious stances is evident in the gods portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness*, respectively."
15. Both Jay Gatsby and Mr. Kurtz are valued by the narrators of their stories because they entertain within themselves a great dream. Compare and contrast the dreams that drive these men, ultimately to their destruction.
16. Discuss the following: "While in *Heart of Darkness*, the fundamental distinctions between people are those of race, in *The Great Gatsby* they are those of social class."
17. In both *The Great Gatsby* and *Heart of Darkness*, the reader comes to know the protagonist through the eyes of the narrator - gradually, imperfectly, piece by piece - forcing the reader to become a participant in the story by putting the pieces together. Discuss the value of this technique, and the advantages of using it, as it appears in these two novels.
18. In some novels or plays, some of the most significant events are mental or psychological - for example, awakenings, discoveries, or changes in consciousness. Choose one such internal event from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and describe how the author manages to give the event the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action. Do not merely summarize the plot.