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The Great Gatsby

by

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1925



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set in New York in the 1920's, at Nick Carraway's bungalow and Gatsby's mansion on West Egg, at the Buchanan's mansion on.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Nick Carraway - the narrator of the novel and the protagonist of the frame narrative. He is a conservative young man from the Midwest, who comes to New York to seek freedom and escape his small-town background. During the course of the novel, he turns thirty and decides to leave the East, judging it to be shallow and meaningless. At the end of the book, he has decided to return home to the Midwest and marry the girl who has been waiting for him.

Jay Gatsby - the protagonist of the main plot of the novel and the character who is referenced in the book's title. A poor young man in the army, he falls in love with Daisy Fay, a wealthy and shallow "golden girl." He spends the rest of his short life trying to win Daisy's love. In order attract her attention, he amasses a fortune, earned from bootlegging and other illegal means, and builds a.....

Minor Characters

Jordan Baker - Daisy's good friend. She is an attractive and wealthy young golfer whom Nick dates while he is in New York. A compulsive liar and a cheat, she is almost as shallow and careless as Daisy.

George Wilson - Myrtle's husband and the owner of a garage in the Valley of Ashes. He idolizes his wife and goes crazy when she is killed. Thinking that

CONFLICT

The novel is really a combination of two plot lines developing simultaneously, creating two sets of protagonists, antagonists, climaxes, and outcomes. Both are given below.

Nick Carraway's plot:

Protagonist: Nick Carraway, the proper young

Antagonist: Nick's antagonist is his past and his own limited.....

Climax: The climax for Nick comes in the eighth chapter, after the blow-up between Tom and Gatsby. The next morning Nick goes over to Gatsby's house. Although he has been

Outcome: Nick's story ends in comedy, for he reckons.....

Jay Gatsby's plot:

Protagonist: Jay Gatsby, the symbol of new money, is the protagonist of a

Antagonist: Gatsby's antagonist is reaching his goal, his dream of being

Climax: The climax for Gatsby occurs in the seventh chapter when he and Tom fight about Daisy. Hoping to make his dream come true, he tries to make Daisy say that.....

Outcome: The plot ends in tragedy for Gatsby. He is tragically shot

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In the spring, Nick Carraway, a young, moral, and conservative young man from the Midwest, has come to New York to learn the bond business and to escape the confining small town environment of his youth. He rents a small bungalow on West Egg, next door to the mansion of Jay Gatsby and across the bay from the home of his cousin, Daisy Buchanan. Shortly after his arrival, Daisy invites him to come for dinner with her, her husband, Tom, and her friend, Jordan Baker. When he arrives at their home, Nick is amazed at the size of it; he is also amazed at the purposelessness of their lives. Daisy, always dressed in white, seems to float about without a serious thought or any ability to plan anything meaningful; Jordan is no better. Tom seems to care only about his polo ponies and his mistress. When he leaves the Buchanan's, Nick feels.....

THEMES

Major Theme

Wealth usually corrupts; it leads to a life of materialism and purposeless

Minor Themes

The East is a symbol of shallowness, carelessness, and corruption, as evidenced by characters such as the Buchanans, Jordan Baker, Meyer Wolfsheim, and Dan Cody. In contrast, the Midwest is.....

MOOD

The mood is largely dark, pessimistic, and.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896. He was the only son of his middle class Catholic family. His father worked for Proctor and Gamble, but he failed in his career. Although his mother's family was wealthy and well-known in the Midwest, she was rather eccentric. As a youth, F. Scott was taught the traditions of the upper class, but his family did not have the financial means to live that way. Fitzgerald strove, however, to be a good student and a successful athlete; as a result, he was a promising and popular young man. He also had

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Great Gatsby is set in the 1920's, a period known in America as the Roaring Twenties. After the end of World War I and before the stock market crash of 1929, there was a spirit of rebellion in the United States. The people attacked the old-time stability and respectability, represented by Nick in the novel. In its place, they drank, partied, and grew liberal, as represented by the Buchanans and the Fitzgeralds themselves.

In the 1920's, the United States went on a joy ride. Fuelled by the war, the economy was booming. The value of stocks steadily rose, spending was at an

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER I

Summary

The main purpose of this first chapter is to introduce the characters and setting of the book. Nick Carraway, the narrator of the entire story, is clearly depicted. He is a young man in his late twenties who grew up in the Midwest in a prominent, respected middle class family with Scottish ancestry. He says he is a decent human

being who was taught at an early age to reserve judgement, a trait which has made him a confidante to many people in his life. He graduated from New Haven (Yale) in 1915, and then served in the military in World War I. When he returned to the Midwest after the war, he quickly grew restless and found his small hometown to be too confining. As a result, he has come to New York City to learn the bond business, like many of his friends. He has rented a home on West Egg, one of two identical (in appearance) egg-shaped islands located on Long Island Sound, twenty miles from the city. His house is a small bungalow, renting for \$80 per month; it is really an eyesore located between two large mansions. The one on his right is a "colossal affair," fashioned after a City Hall in Normandy, France, complete with marble swimming pool and forty acres of lawn and gardens. Nick has learned that a Mr. Jay Gatsby owns and inhabits the mansion.

East Egg is located across a small bay from West Egg, but they are separated by more than a body of water. West Egg is the less fashionable island, peopled with flashy mansions built by new money; in contrast, East Egg is filled with the fashionable, substantial, and sturdy palaces representing the old guard and inherited wealth. It is on East Egg that Nick Carraway's distant cousin Daisy lives with her husband Tom Buchanan. Tom, who was at Yale with Nick, was a football hero in college and comes from an enormously wealthy Chicago family. After marrying Daisy, the two of them "drifted" for several years from place to place, including a year's stay in France. Now Tom has brought his polo ponies east and established himself and his family in an elaborate Georgian Colonial mansion on East Egg, of which he is very proud.

Nick has been invited to dinner at the Buchanans. When he arrives at their home, he is amazed at its size and the expansive grounds that run from the house for a quarter of a mile down to the beach. Tom Buchanan, his thirty year old host, is standing on the wide front porch, dressed in his riding clothes. Nick immediately notices that Tom has changed since his college days. Although still blond, handsome, and muscular, he appears more sturdy and arrogant; in fact, Nick comments that Tom has a "cruel body, capable of enormous leverage," an analysis which foreshadows Tom's future actions.

In total contrast to Tom's appearance, Daisy, Tom's wife and Nick's cousin, appears to be light as a feather. It is an appropriate image, for there is not much depth to her. She sits inside the living room on a sofa and is dressed in a lightweight, white garment that is rippling in the breeze, giving the young woman the image of floating. Her voice, light and thrilling to Nick, intensifies the cool, airy picture of her appearance, but as she speaks, Daisy reveals that her purpose in life, like her looks, is also "flitting." She tells Nick that they will all have to plan to do something, but it is beyond Daisy to make any plans. She even says of herself that each year she looks forward to June 21, the longest day of the year, and then manages to miss it each time. Throughout the evening, she continues with such inconsequential chatter. When Nick looks in her eyes, he sees the true Daisy, for they hold a sadness and absence of desire.

During the course of the dinner, part of the reason for Daisy's unhappiness is revealed. When Tom receives a phone call and leaves the table, followed by his wife, a second guest, Jordan Baker, tells Nick that Tom has a mistress in the city. In a conversation after dinner, Daisy also reveals other "turbulent emotions" to Nick. She tells him that when she had her daughter two years ago, Tom was no where around. She is glad that the child is a daughter, for she feels she can raise her to be "a fool--that's the best thing a girl can be in the world, a beautiful little fool." She then admits her misery to Nick and says, "I've had a very bad time, and I'm pretty cynical about everything." The noble Nick, hesitant to make judgements, feels very uneasy about Daisy's confessions and the smirk that spoils her lovely face. He also feels like an outsider, excluded from the distinguished secret society to which the Buchanan's belong.

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After their private conversation on the porch, Nick and Daisy go inside to join Tom and Jordan. Tom warns Nick about Daisy's complaints and says, "Don't believe everything you hear." Nick then learns that Jordan is a well-known golf star, and Daisy teases them both about arranging their marriage. They then quiz Nick about his being "engaged to a girl out West," but he explains that she is only a friend and part of the reason he has escaped to the East coast. Since Jordan must depart to rest before her morning golf tournament, Nick also takes his leave. As he drives away, he has feelings of confusion and disgust about the Buchanans. He really feels that Daisy and her daughter should rush out of Tom's house forever, but he also knows that will never happen.

When Nick arrives home, he stands outside to take in the view of the bay. He notices that his neighbor is also outside, staring at the stars with hands in his pocket. Just as Nick prepares to greet him, the neighbor stretches out his arms to the dark water and appears to tremble. Nick looks out to the bay to see what attracts the neighbor's attention, but he sees only a single green light, probably at the end of a dock in East Egg. When Nick looks back toward his neighbor, the man has vanished. What an appropriate first glimpse of the mysterious Gatsby!

Notes

Nick Carraway, the narrator of the book, tells the story from his memory in the first person point of view, participates in the action of the plot from time to time, and evaluates the events occurring in the story. He also tells his own story, which serves as the frame narrative to Gatsby's own plot. It is significant to note that Nick, after he has returned to the Midwest, opens the first chapter with a reflection about Gatsby, before the main character is ever seen or even introduced:

When I came back from the East last autumn, I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction -- Gatsby who represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn....There was something gorgeous about him....it was an extraordinary gift for hope; 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.

This early foreshadowing (about the outcome of the plot that is soon to unravel) serves several purposes. It builds dramatic effect and emphasizes that Nick's experience in New York has profoundly changed him, that he is capable of making a moral judgement, and that Gatsby is judged to be a romantic who is better than all of the others in the East who suffer from foulness and meaninglessness.

After these opening comments, Nick explains his Midwestern background and ethics in some detail. The action of the entire novel, set mainly on the flashy islands of East and West Egg, New York, is in total contrast to Nick's stable background; and yet Fitzgerald makes Nick's participation in the story plausible by creating him as a well-to-do young man with social graces. He happens to be the cousin of Daisy Buchanan and the neighbor of Jay Gatsby. He also prides himself in not judging people, therefore, often serving as a confidante.

The contrast between Nick's background and the East is the first of many in this chapter. West Egg, peopled by the "nouveaux riches" is contrasted to East Egg, home of the old money. Gatsby's gaudy mansion, full of flash, imitation, and newness, is contrasted to the stately Georgian mansion belonging to Tom and Daisy Buchanan. Tom's dark, sturdy, powerful image is in stark contrast to the airy, floating, white image of his wife Daisy.

Nick's purpose and planning in life (he is all business between soldiering and learning bonds) is in contrast to the aimlessness and drifting of Tom and Daisy.

Not surprisingly, Nick is uncomfortable with the contrast to the Buchanans that he feels. His decent Midwestern upbringing is shaken by Daisy's wanting to bring her daughter up to be a fool, by Tom's having a mistress who is bold enough to call his home, by Tom's open hostility to his wife in conversation, and by their drifting nature and inability to plan. It is no wonder that when he leaves the Buchanans after dinner, he feels unsettled - - "confused" and "disgusted." Fitzgerald is already developing the theme that "money corrupts." Daisy and Tom have unlimited wealth, but limited inner strength or purpose.

Ironically, when Nick returns home from East Egg, he receives his first glimpse of his neighbor, Jay Gatsby, and it is a symbolic image. Gatsby, already defined as a romantic, is outside in the dark, staring at the stars, almost in the appearance of worship. He then stretches out his hands toward a green light on the shore of East Egg. The green light, which is at the end of the Buchanans' dock, is the visible representation of Gatsby's unattainable vision - - to be something he can never be, to have something he can never have. The light, significantly, is green -- the color for "go," the color of new life, and the color of hope. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of the identical Egg Islands, the color of green is also money, a corrupting influence in life.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Nick Carraway - Nick Carraway is the narrator of the entire novel, the protagonist of his own plot, and the moral judge of the events that surround him. He is a practical and conservative young man who turns thirty during the course of the story. Raised in a small town in the Midwest, he believes his hometown to be stifling and decides to move to the East Coast to learn the bond business. He hopes to find a sense of identity and freedom in New York. He rents a small bungalow out from

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete MonkeyNotes summary.

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

There are many themes in this complex novel. The central theme, however, is a comparison of the corrupting influence of wealth to the purity of a dream. Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, Dan Cody, and Meyer Wolfsheim are examples of people who have been corrupted by their money. Daisy, born and married to wealth, has no values and no purpose in life. She finds her existence to be boring as she floats from one social scene to the next; usually she is dressed in white with accents of gold and silver (the colors of money); even her voices sounds like money. In spite of the wealth, she verbally wonders what she will do with the next day, the next thirty days, and the next thirty years; unfortunately, she does not have a clue. Even her daughter, Pammy, does not give any meaning to Daisy's life, for she views the child only as a toy or a plaything. Because of her boredom, she has an affair with Gatsby when she is eighteen, for she is attracted by his good looks and his army uniform. After her marriage to Tom, she has another affair with Gatsby to relieve her boredom; it is a trifling entertainment to her. She does not value the feelings of others or even human life. When she hits and kills Myrtle Wilson, she does not even stop. When Gatsby is shot, she does not even telephone or send flowers. Daisy is only worried about.....

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE NOVEL

Fitzgerald clearly intends for Gatsby's dream to be symbolic of the American Dream for wealth and youth. Gatsby genuinely believes that if a person makes enough money and amasses a great enough fortune, he can

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buy anything. He thinks his wealth can erase the last five years of his and Daisy's life and reunite them at the point at which he left her before he went away to the war. In a similar fashion, all Americans have a tendency to believe that if they have enough money, they can manipulate time, staying perpetually young, and buy their happiness through materialistic spending. Throughout the novel, there are many parties, a hallmark of the rich. But each festivity ends in waste (the trash left behind by the guests) or violence (Myrtle's broken nose and subsequent accidental death.) Between the wealth of.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain Nick Carraway's conflict and how it is resolved.
2. Give examples of Nick's morality and conservatism in the book
3. Describe Daisy Fay Buchanan. How did Gatsby meet her and why is he so attracted to her?.....

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