

The
GREAT GATSBY



BOOK
CLUB
KIT

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Discussion Questions

1. When *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, very few people besides Fitzgerald himself believed it would ever become an American classic. It garnered mixed reviews and mediocre sales, with fewer than 24,000 copies in print during the author's lifetime. It wasn't until five years after Fitzgerald's death, when the U.S. military distributed 105,000 copies to service members in WWII that the book began to build steam and popularity. Why do you think it finally struck a chord? How do you think *The Great Gatsby* transcended its underwhelming reception to become such a strong contender for the Great American Novel? What do you think it says about the USA?
2. In the century since *The Great Gatsby* was published, the mythology of F. Scott Fitzgerald as a Jazz Age icon, a glamorous reveler, and one-half of a social power couple has only grown stronger. How does this popular view of Fitzgerald inform your reading? Do you believe it's possible to separate your reading experience from what you know about the life of the author? Why or why not?
3. Numerous scholars, including Keath Fraser in his 1979 essay "Another Reading of *The Great Gatsby*" and Edward Wasiolek in his 1992 essay "The Sexual Drama of Nick and Gatsby," have argued for a reading of the novel in which Nick Carraway is gay. Proponents of this theory cite, in addition to plenty of other homoerotic language, the scene in Chapter 3 in which Nick attends a party with Tom and his mistress, Myrtle. Nick leaves with a Mr. McKee and ends up in his bedroom, with Mr. McKee only wearing his underwear. Some read just Nick as gay, while others consider Gatsby equally repressed. Do you agree with either of these theories? Why or why not? If true, how would this affect the modern American literary canon?
4. Which character strikes you as the most contemporary? The most old-fashioned? Why?
5. In 2000, Carlyle V. Thompson, an assistant professor at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, NY, presented an argument that Fitzgerald wrote *Gatsby* as a pale Black man who passed as white. Evidence cited includes: Gatsby wears his hair trimmed short, owns 40 acres and a mansion

(as opposed to 40 acres and a mule), changed his name from Gatz, and tells Nick that his family is dead. As Thompson wrote in his paper, "The word 'dead' is significant in that those light-skinned black [sic] individuals who pass for white become symbolically dead to their families." Does any part of this theory ring true to you? Why or why not? How might this reading lend greater gravitas to the events of the novel?

6. *Gatsby*-themed parties, with flapper costumes and overflowing coupe glasses, are still wildly popular in mainstream culture. In what ways do these parties misread the morality and overarching themes of the novel? What similarities do you see between the way people behave today and the way people in Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan's circles behaved?
7. Writer and journalist Kathryn Schulz wrote of Daisy and Gatsby's relationship as "one part nostalgia, four parts narrative expedience, and zero parts anything else -- love, sex, desire, any kind of palpable connection." Fitzgerald himself admitted that "I gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy." Yet, over the years, readers have interpreted the novel as a testament of thwarted love, enduring passion, and steadfast devotion. Why do you think this story has gained its romantic reputation? How does it compare to the contemporary representations of romance in literature today?
8. There is no doubt that *The Great Gatsby* has remained so popular because of its importance in high school classrooms and curriculums. Why do you think this book is so impactful for young people? Do you believe the lessons and themes of this novel remain true for people coming of age today? In what ways has the novel become irrelevant?
9. The female characters in *The Great Gatsby* -- Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and Jordan Baker -- defy conventional morality and are even unlikable. Why do you think that is?
10. Rosa Inoncencio Smith wrote that while *The Great Gatsby* is often considered a story about the American Dream, "it is also a story about power under threat, and of how that power, lashing out, can render truth irrelevant." In what ways do you observe this in the novel? How do you see these insights about power in our current society?

Love For Gatsby Throughout The Years

"A curious book, a mystical, glamorous story of today."

--Edwin Clark, *The New York Times*, 1925

"The first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James."

--T.S. Eliot, 1925

"The story is powerful as much for what is suggested as for what is told. It leaves the reader in a mood of chastened wonder, in which fact after fact, implication after implication is pondered over, weighed, and measured. And when all are linked together, the weight of the story as a revelation of life and as a work of art becomes apparent. And it is very great. Mr. Fitzgerald has certainly arrived."

--Lillian C. Ford, *Los Angeles Times*, 1925

"In Fitzgerald's work the voice of his prose is of the essence of his success . . . It is, I would venture to say, the ideal voice of the novelist."

--Lionel Trilling, 1945

"The best picture we possess of the age in which it was written, and it also achieves a sort of moral permanence . . . a fable of the 1920s that has survived as a legend for other times."

--Malcolm Cowley, 1953

"[*The Great Gatsby*] is the American masterwork, the finest work of fiction by any of this country's writers . . . No American novel comes closer than *Gatsby* to surpassing literary artistry, and none tells us more about ourselves."

--Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*, 2007

"I'm a devoted rereader of *The Great Gatsby* -- I'm never going to get tired of it."

--Ann Patchett, 2014

"This book gets so much out of what is, ultimately, a rather slim story. I adore it."

--Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015

Fascinating Facts

- Fitzgerald had trouble naming *The Great Gatsby*, jumping from Trimalchio in West Egg; Among Ash-Heaps and Millionaires; On the Road to West Egg; Under the Red, White, and Blue; Gold-Hatted Gatsby; and The High-Bouncing Lover. Fitzgerald gave in, though he still thought it only fair, rather bad than good.”
- Fitzgerald was so impressed by the original art deco cover for his novel that he rewrote portions to suit the artwork.
- Fitzgerald’s editor Maxwell Perkins also brought Ernest Hemingway to prominence, publishing *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926.
- *The Great Gatsby* was partly inspired by a French novel called *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier, written in 1913. It has since been translated into English with the titles *The Wanderer* and *The Lost Estate*.
- The four-line poem entitled “Then Wear the Gold Hat” at the start of *The Great Gatsby* is credited to Thomas Parke D’Invilliers. In reality, D’Invilliers doesn’t exist. He is in fact a character from Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*.
- Many of *Gatsby*’s characters were based on flesh and blood friends and lovers. Daisy was based on Ginevra King, a Chicago debutante and one of Fitzgerald’s girlfriends. One Fitzgerald scholar says his romance with King was the most important relationship he experienced, even more so than the one with his wife. That may be true, considering that these words, found written in Fitzgerald’s ledger, are thought to have been said by King’s father: “Poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls.”
- Similarly, Daisy Buchanan’s best friend Jordan was modeled on one of Ginevra’s good friends, Edith Cummings. Cummings was not only a fellow debutante, but also a famous amateur golfer. Dubbed “The Fairway Flapper,” Cummings won the U.S. Women’s Amateur in 1924, the year before *Gatsby* was published.

- Speaking of Jordan Baker, her name was a play on two popular car brands of the Roaring Twenties: the Jordan Motor Car Company and the Baker Motor Vehicle. The play on words was meant to invoke the feeling of freedom and a “fast” reputation.
- For writing one of the most beloved novels of all time, Fitzgerald received a \$3,993 advance, and \$1,981.25 when it was published. He later received \$16,666 for the movie rights.
- Fitzgerald was just shy of 30 years old when *The Great Gatsby* was published.
- Unlike Fitzgerald’s previous two novels, *Gatsby* was not a commercial success. It sold just 20,000 copies in the entire first year of publication.
- Fitzgerald was convinced that the reason the book wasn’t a rousing success was because *Gatsby* didn’t have a single admirable female character and, at the time, the majority of people reading novels were women. He also thought that the title, which was only “fair,” resulted in poor sales.
- Fitzgerald died of a heart attack at 44, thinking of himself as a failure. Despite garnering some modest achievements in his lifetime, he never witnessed the enormous commercial and critical success of his book *The Great Gatsby*.
- Since it was first published, *The Great Gatsby* has inspired five English-language film adaptations, various stage productions (including an opera), and has even been turned into a computer game, in which Carraway must dodge flappers and evil butlers in his quest to locate Jay Gatsby. The earliest adaptation of the novel, filmed without sound in 1926, a year after the book was published, has been lost: Only the trailer and publicity photos remain.

Sources:

penguin.com.au/books/the-great-gatsby-9780241965672/article/85-great-gatsby-10-things
mentalfloss.com/article/50822/24-great-gatsby-facts