
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN SPEZIAL

Textanalyse und Interpretation zu

F. Scott Fitzgerald

THE GREAT GATSBY

Patrick Charles

Alle erforderlichen Infos für Abitur, Matura, Klausur und Referat
plus Musteraufgaben mit Lösungsansätzen

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1. AT A GLANCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS

In order for readers to be able to find the most relevant sections quickly and easily, here is a summary and overview of the following book:

Part 2 is an introduction to the author and his works and the contemporary world.

- ⇨ p. 11 ff. → F. Scott Fitzgerald lived 1896–1940 and was considered the chronicler of the Jazz Age.
- ⇨ p. 14 ff. → The 1920s were a period of rapid and profound changes in American society, industry, culture and commercial life.
- ⇨ p. 26 ff. → He wrote novels and short stories about the society around him: his main themes included the promise of youth and the despair of age, and love and wealth.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of various elements of the novel.

The Great Gatsby – Origins and Sources

- ⇨ p. 33 ff. → The book was published in 1925.
- It was inspired in part by time the Fitzgeralds spent living on Long Island.
- The book picked up on themes which Fitzgerald had been writing about in his earlier novels and stories.
- During the writing process Fitzgerald knew that *The Great Gatsby* would be his most important work.

Summaries

The novel is set on Long Island, New York, and tells the story, narrated by Nick Carraway, of mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his love for Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby and Daisy had been in love before the First World War. During the war they lost contact and Daisy married Tom, a wealthy and brutal womaniser. As Nick discovers during the summer of 1922, Gatsby came from poor origins and changed his identity as a boy. He became wealthy in order to become worthy of Daisy. When the two of them are reunited and begin an affair, Gatsby and Tom confront each other. Daisy chooses Tom. Daisy accidentally kills Tom's mistress Myrtle in a motor accident and Myrtle's husband takes revenge by killing Gatsby, whom Tom has told him is responsible. At the end of the novel Tom and Daisy have disappeared and Nick organises Gatsby's lonely funeral before returning to his home in the Midwest, shocked and disappointed by all he has witnessed. ⇨ p.38 ff.

Structure

The novel is narrated two years after the events by one of the characters, and therefore has an unusually complex narrative structure. Readers are encouraged to assess the events and the characters from different perspectives. This structure allows the author to use various voices and viewpoints in telling the story. Fitzgerald, writing "through" Nick, is able to give the novel a circular framework. Nick's distanced yet participatory role in the novel also complicates the structure, as there is no clear centre, and the roles of the characters within the novel are subject to interpretation. ⇨ p.59 ff.

Characters – Constellations and Characteristics**The main characters:**

⇨ p. 69 ff.

Nick Carraway

the narrator: distant cousin to Daisy, familiar with Tom from their time in college, romantically involved with Jordan, and by the end of the novel Gatsby's only friend. Nick witnesses Gatsby and Daisy's reunion and the tragedies that follow, with the deaths of Gatsby, Myrtle and George. He returns to the Midwest, disturbed by the world of the East.

⇨ p. 71 ff.

Jay Gatsby

born James Gatz, he tried to escape his poor origins by becoming Jay Gatsby. He learned how to be rich from Dan Cody, fell in love with Daisy after enlisting to serve in World War I, and when he returned became wealthy distributing illegal alcohol across the country. He wins Daisy briefly but she returns to Tom, and Gatsby is then killed by George Wilson in a case of mistaken identity.

⇨ p. 75 ff.

Daisy Buchanan

beautiful and wealthy, Daisy was in love with Gatsby before the war, but was unwilling or unable to wait for him and married Tom Buchanan. She accidentally kills Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby's car.

⇨ p. 78 ff.

Tom Buchanan

an arrogant, wealthy, brutish bigot, Tom is having an affair with Myrtle Wilson. When Gatsby challenges him for Daisy, Tom persuades her to stay with him because they share a bond which Gatsby, coming from the lower classes, can never understand. He directs the vengeful George towards Gatsby.

Jordan Baker

⇒ p. 81 f.

a friend of Daisy and Tom, and Nick's lover. Jordan is a cool, modern woman, a professional golfer, and fundamentally dishonest.

Myrtle Wilson

⇒ p. 82 f.

frustrated and lonely, Myrtle is having an affair with Tom. She is killed by Daisy driving Gatsby's car.

George Wilson

⇒ p. 84 f.

runs a garage in an industrial wasteland. He is exhausted and poor and longs to escape to a better life in the West. After Myrtle is killed he takes revenge by killing Gatsby and then commits suicide.

Other characters:

⇒ p. 85 ff.

Henry Gatz – James Gatz's father

Dan Cody – The wealthy adventurer who inspired James Gatz to become Jay Gatsby

Meyer Wolfshiem – A gambler in New York who helped Gatsby establish his illegal business

"Owl Eyes" – A man who attends Gatsby's parties and funeral

Michaelis – A friend of George Wilson

Catherine – Myrtle's sister

Notes on Themes

Here are notes on the major themes in the novel with quotations and brief analyses: ⇒ p. 91 ff.

→ America and the American Dream

→ Society and wealth

→ The Jazz Age: the modern world

→ Desire and the past

→ Vision

Style and Language

⇨ p. 115 ff.

Fitzgerald has always been praised as a writer whose language is unusually rich and evocative. In *The Great Gatsby* he makes excellent use of diverse “voices” and tones, as well as intricate imagery, to enhance and deepen the ideas he is expressing.

- Seasons and other imagery and symbolism
- Ambiguity
- Colour symbolism
- Narrative tone

Approaches to Interpretation

⇨ p. 126 ff.

Here is a brief look at three major themes focussed on by literary studies on *The Great Gatsby*.

- Gender roles
- American identity and the myths of The Frontier
- The modern world

2.1 Biography

2. F. SCOTT FITZGERALD: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
Sep. 24, 1896	Saint Paul, Minnesota (USA)	Born	
1908–11	St Paul Academy, Saint Paul Minnesota	Student at St Paul Academy.	12–15
1909–11	Newman School, Hackensack New Jersey	First publication: short story <i>The Mystery of the Raymond Mortgage</i> published in the school magazine.	13–15
1911–13	Princeton University, Princeton New Jersey	Attended Catholic prep school (to prepare students for university), and continued to write short stories – three are published in the school magazine – and stage plays, two of which are staged at school.	15–17
1913–17	Kansas, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama and Long Island	Began studying but dropped out in 1917. During his time at Princeton he met future literary figures like Edmund Wilson, and had more stories published in the university magazine.	17–21
1917–19	New York, Saint Paul	Military service. Joined the army after quitting university and was stationed at various army bases around the country. Met and fell in love with Zelda. First novel, <i>The Romantic Egotist</i> , was rejected by the publisher Scribners.	21–23



F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)
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2.2 Contemporary Background

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The Great Gatsby was written during the years in which the 20th century really began. The old world had died in the First World War, and a new one was being shaped: by the energy and freedom of free market capitalism, rapidly increasing populations and by the breakdown of traditional hierarchies – the Jazz Age.

The political and social situation

The Great Gatsby was written during the years in which the 20th century really began. The old world had died in the First World War¹, and a new one was being shaped: by the energy and freedom of free market capitalism, rapidly increasing populations and great leaps forward in technology and in the availability and quantity of consumer goods; and by **the energy and freedom released by the breakdown of traditional hierarchies** and the emergence of a hedonist, youth-oriented "pop culture" centred on jazz music, parties and sexual liberation. Fitzgerald defined this energy in his 1931 essay *Echoes of the Jazz Age* as "all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War"². This energy was spent on hedonism rather than social activism. As he wrote in 1931, "the events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary [...] It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all."³

1 1914–18: The USA became active in 1917 when Germany began attacking ships in the Atlantic.

2 <http://fitzgerald.narod.ru/crackup/056e-eho.htm>

3 *ibid.*

2.2 Contemporary Background

Fitzgerald invented the term The Jazz Age, which was also called **the Golden 20s** (usually referring to Europe) or the Roaring 20s, and was characterised by an equally powerful dark side, a sense of loss, emptiness and disorientation for a “lost generation” surrounded by the decay of traditional social structures and memories of the unprecedented slaughter of the First World War. Sandwiched between the War to End All Wars and the Great Depression⁴, this period is a fascinating and evocative period in American history and set the scene for many lasting myths of American identity and culture.

The Jazz Age

Politics and the economy

Coming out of the First World War, the United States was led by Woodrow Wilson (President 1913–1921), a progressive⁵ who remains controversial to this day. While **he initiated many important reforms, including laws restricting child labour and regulating work conditions**, he proved to be deeply racist in both his personal views and political dealing. He had been in favour of the US joining the League of Nations, an international organisation of nations formed after the peace treaties at the end of the First World War, but was defeated by the Senate. He was succeeded as president by Warren G. Harding, a conservative isolationist who rejected the progressive era’s attempts to reform government and force social change. The US became increasingly inward-looking from this point on. As well as this international attitude of refusing to “join the club”, taxes on imported goods were raised (encouraging domestic consumers to buy American goods) and there

Isolationism and economic growth

4 A worldwide economic recession which began with the Wall Street stock market crash of October 29 1929 and lasted until 1941.

5 American progressivism was a political movement lasting from 1890 until 1930 which attempt to fight corruption in politics and promote social and economic reforms.

2.2 Contemporary Background

was an end to free immigration. Harding was followed by Calvin Coolidge, who was president when the Great Depression began in 1929, and who continued to raise taxes on imports and cut federal taxes. These three Republican presidents worked to strengthen the relationship between government and big businesses in the US.

Mass media:
press, radio,
cinema newsreels

The war years had been dominated by emotional, patriotic political activity: following the war there was a return to what President Harding called “normalcy” – basically, to the ideal of a peaceful and productive United States. He used the new mass media – the press, radio, and cinema newsreels – to promote his vision in a “front porch campaign”⁶, capturing the public imagination as he was featured in the press welcoming film stars and celebrities from the world of sport, entertainment and industry to his home in Ohio.

The “return to normalcy” proved difficult, however, as the period following the First World War was dominated by **massive industrial, commercial and social growth** and consequent shifts in lifestyle and culture. It was indeed a time of great prosperity with so many men from the armed forces returning to join the workforce, but Harding’s “normalcy” was an idealised myth, and the new reality was very different.

Prohibition, racism and immigration

The isolationism and provincialism of the US during this era can be seen in many areas. Efforts to encourage consumption of domestic products are an obvious point, as are the increasingly restrictive immigration laws. These were accompanied by other phenomena such as Prohibition and the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist secret society based in the American South.

⁶ Political campaigns in which the candidate stays at or near home and supporters are encouraged to come and listen to speeches.

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote four novels (a fifth was published posthumously) and dozens of short stories. He also published essays and worked on screenplays. Fitzgerald's major work was concerned with people, places and situations with which he was familiar – the East Coast, the aimlessness of young men, love, status, wealth and greed, and the lifestyles of the Jazz Age.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote four novels (a fifth was published posthumously) and dozens of short stories, which varied widely in quality from substantial pieces like *The Diamond as Big as The Ritz* (1922) to lightweight tales produced when money ran short. He also published essays and worked on screenplays while he was living in Hollywood. He adapted one of his short stories (*The Vegetable*, 1923) into a play. Fitzgerald's major work was concerned with people, places and situations with which he was familiar – the East Coast, the aimlessness of young men, love, status, wealth and greed, and the lifestyles of Jazz Age. Here is a brief introduction to other relevant works which had a direct thematic relevance to the ideas he would cover in *The Great Gatsby*.

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

The novels

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1920	<i>This Side of Paradise</i>
1922	<i>The Beautiful and the Damned</i>
1925	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
1934	<i>Tender is the Night</i>
1941 (posthumous)	<i>The Love of the Last Tycoon</i>

This Side of Paradise

Fitzgerald's debut novel reworked his earlier, unpublished attempt, *The Romantic Egotist*. As with most of his work it is autobiographically influenced: Fitzgerald was a writer who wrote about what he knew. The book follows Amory Blaine. Convinced of his shining future, he goes to Princeton, and later serves during the First World War, before failing to marry a wealthy young woman in New York. Having disappointed his own expectations, by the end of the novel Amory is 24, alone, and forced to accept that his own egotistical nature has denied him happiness. The **themes of greed, status and love**, which would always interest Fitzgerald as a writer, are evident here. *Paradise* was a great success and while it did not make him rich, the fame and respect it brought him did allow Fitzgerald to convince Zelda to marry him, and to earn more money for his short stories.

Popular and successful

3.1 Origins and Sources

3. ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 Origins and Sources

The story and themes of *The Great Gatsby* – doomed love, wealth and status, the social life of the East Coast – had been tackled by Fitzgerald before. The plot appeared in an early form in the short story *Winter Dream* (1922), and the themes were present in many of his earlier stories and his two previous novels. The initial idea for the book had come to him as early as 1922 (the year in which the book is set), after spending time living on Long Island, where the novel is also set. It was only after moving to France in 1924 that he began to work seriously on the novel, the importance of which he realised early. He saw it as the chance for him to prove himself as a real writer of literature, rather than a professional producer of short stories for magazines. He finished work on the novel in 1925, and it was published by Scribner's of New York in April that year.

Origin and inspiration

From 1922 to 1923 F. Scott Fitzgerald, his wife Zelda and their daughter Scottie lived in a rented house in Great Neck, Long Island. This became the West Egg of the book – East Egg is based on Sands Point, across the water in Port Washington. The **Fitzgeralds were at this time a celebrity couple**, famous for their youth, beauty and modern lifestyle. In the early '20s, Long Island was popular with other modern celebrities, and was associated with “new money” – this distinction between “old” and “new” money

Inspired by
Long Island

3.1 Origins and Sources

was highlighted in the fictional West and East Egg communities in *The Great Gatsby*. Many of the features with which the Roaring 20s and the Jazz Age were associated were concentrated in this environment: the wild lifestyles of the wealthy and the new freedoms offered by cars, music and dancing shattered traditional expectations. Fitzgerald incorporated these changes in the book he was planning.

Composition and writing

Fitzgerald seems to have had **difficulties in arranging the plot** to his satisfaction. It is known that he believed the book would be important for him as a writer, a way to prove that he was capable of writing more than just short stories (which he himself considered “trashy”) and one popular novel. His conviction of the significance of the work made him discard the original version – published by Cambridge University Press in 2000 under its title *Trimalchio* – and work through aspects of the plot in different forms in the short stories later collected in *All the Sad Young Men*.

The themes in the novel were those which had always interested Fitzgerald as a writer and which continued to do so in his later career. The issues which inspired the “Lost Generation” – **the emptiness and search for orientation and meaning** in the wake of the First World War – are present, as are the themes of doomed love and wealth and status. The character of Gatsby, who embodies the ideal vertical progression of the American Dream from poor boy to millionaire was the perfect figure in whom to gather all these themes together and through whom Fitzgerald could write about personal subjects (love, obsession, ambition) as well as larger social issues (crime, wealth, inequality) and also tackle more abstract matters (the old and the new, changing attitudes to morality, and the American Dream itself).

The book was important to Fitzgerald and he worked hard and long on it

He continued to explore the themes which had always interested him

3.2 Summaries

3.2 Summaries

In the summer of 1922, Nick Carraway takes a job in New York and rents a house on Long Island next to the mansion of a mysterious millionaire called Gatsby, who throws extravagant parties all through the summer. Nick's cousin Daisy and her wealthy husband Tom Buchanan also live on Long Island. As Nick and Gatsby get to know each other, Nick learns that Gatsby is in love with Daisy, and has been for years. They meet at Nick's house and begin an affair.

Tom is also having an affair, with Myrtle, the abused wife of poor car mechanic George Wilson, who lives in squalor in the "valley of ashes" between the fashionable resorts of Long Island and the city. One night, after Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Nick and Nick's girlfriend Jordan have been to New York, Tom and Gatsby confront one another over Daisy's affections. Daisy, driving Gatsby's car home, kills Myrtle, who has run into the road towards the car she believes to be Tom's.

After the accident Nick learns about Gatsby's past, about his love for Daisy and how he reinvented himself and earned his wealth, all in order to win her back.

George Wilson is heartbroken and is led by Tom to believe that Gatsby was driving the car which killed Myrtle. George goes to Gatsby's house and shoots him, before turning the gun on himself.

Nick, dismayed by events and disappointed by the people he has met, organises Gatsby's funeral and then leaves the East Coast for good.

3.2 Summaries

Chapter I (pp. 5–34)

The narrator Nick Carraway moves to live on Long Island near New York. His cousin Daisy and her husband Tom live nearby, and are apparently unhappy in their marriage. His neighbour is a mysterious millionaire called Gatsby.

In the first chapter we are introduced to the narrator, Nick Carraway, who presents himself as a man in whom others like to confide, as he is a tolerant and non-judgemental person. He then explains what reaction the events he is about to describe in the book had on him, and that his tolerance was tested by these events of the summer of 1922. One exception is Gatsby, for whom he feels love and sympathy, and whose romantic nature and capacity for hope he admires.

Nick briefly describes who he is and where he came from. He was born into a prominent and successful family in the Midwest¹⁵. He served in the First World War and came back feeling “restless” (p. 8 l. 12), leading him to leave his home and begin a career in finance. This was in the spring of 1922. Because he didn’t want to live in the city itself, he ended up renting a small house in a “commuting town”, West Egg on Long Island. By the summer of 1922 he is feeling like “an original settler” (p. 9 l. 23) and is enthusiastic and optimistic about the future.

His little house is next door to a huge mansion, apparently modelled on a French grand hotel, which belongs to someone called Gatsby. This mansion looks out over the water to the villas and “white palaces” (p. 12 l. 19) of East Egg, the more fashionable place to live. This is where Nick’s second cousin once removed

15 Geographically, the states Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The Midwest has a special significance in American tradition as the ‘heartland’, the home of American values and traditions.

3.2 Summaries

(they share a great-great-grandparent) Daisy lives with her husband Tom Buchanan, whom Nick had known in college. Tom is physically striking, a large and powerful man, who comes from an “enormously wealthy” (p. 13 ll. 8–9) family in Chicago. He and Daisy had lived in France for a year and after that had been drifting, living wherever “people were rich together” (p. 13 l. 19), and for unexplained reasons had now come to settle on the East Coast.

Daisy and Tom

Nick drives over to visit the Buchanans one evening. They live in a mansion with a huge garden. Tom greets Nick, who is struck by his “arrogant eyes” (p. 14 l. 20) and the overall impression of a “cruel body” (p. 15 l. 8). Tom is clearly an arrogant, restless man with whom Nick has a strangely unaffectionate friendship.

Tom shows Nick around his mansion and they find Daisy and a friend of hers whom Nick doesn’t know, later introduced as Jordan Baker. Daisy is a charming and delicate woman, “sad and lovely” (p. 18 l. 17), a woman who obviously knows the effect she has on men and enjoys exploiting it by adopting an innocent and helpless manner. She is playfully self-centred and combines a kind of childishness with the sophistication of the elite. She questions Nick about where he has been and what he has been doing and mentions that she has a child. Tom interrupts the conversation to ask Nick about what work he’s doing; during this interruption he makes it clear that he and Daisy will be staying in the East. He glances at Daisy when he says that he would be a fool to live anywhere else.

Gatsby is mentioned

Jordan at this point joins in and Nick is interested in her, and thinks he has seen her face somewhere. She knows that he lives in West Egg and asks if he knows Gatsby: Daisy reacts to the name. There is no time to learn more as dinner is announced.

During the course of the evening Nick observes that Daisy and Tom are not happy with one another. Nick is interested in Daisy and Jordan’s cool sophistication, which is so different from conversation

3.3 Structure

3.3 Structure

The novel is unusual in that it doesn't, strictly speaking, have a single centre: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, or Daisy Buchanan? The storyteller, the tragic central figure, or the focus of the characters' obsessions?

Person at the centre

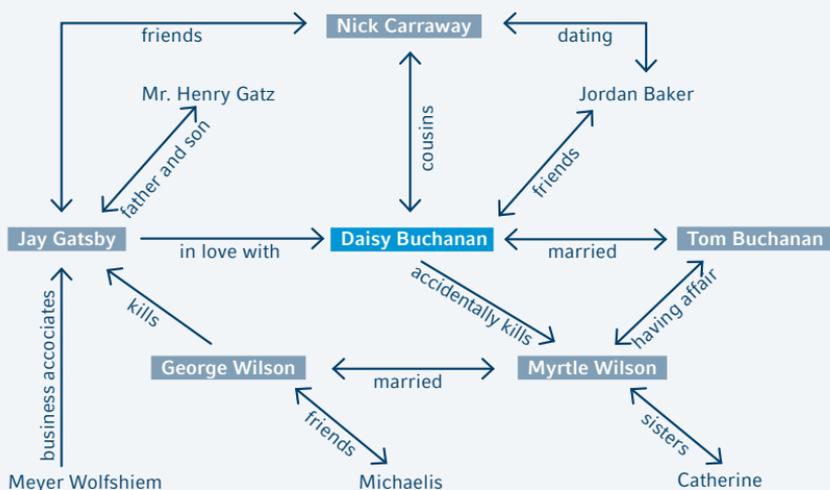
Because Nick is both a character and an observer, and because the entire story is arranged and told by him, he cannot be pushed to the sidelines. But *The Great Gatsby* is not really Nick's story. Despite the events which concern him directly – the relationship with Jordan, for example – **he is intimately involved in someone else's tragedy**. And although the book bears his name, and his story and character is at the heart of the novel, Gatsby is himself just one corner in the love triangle which makes the novel's plot, and his own story is a mystery which forms the background to the events of the summer.

The centre of the novel

Considering the network of relationships and the focus of the various obsessions and events in the novel, the most efficient map to include all the characters has Daisy Buchanan, the tragically hollow object and focus of the novel's events, at its centre:

3.3 Structure

Daisy at the centre



- Nick as narrator and Mr Henry Gatz as grieving parent transcend the murky mess of events.
- On the right hand side then are the clear-cut, hard figures: the cynical, sophisticated Jordan, the arrogant, thuggish Tom, and the shallow and crude Myrtle.
- Daisy is the apex of the love triangle: her desirability inspires Gatsby's unreal dreams, and as his wife she is within Tom's possessive sphere.
- Nick is the narrator and as such must be positioned above the others in a position from which, as in the text, he can access their various viewpoints in telling the story.

3.4 The Characters: Constellations and Characteristics

3.4 The Characters: Constellations and Characteristics

The central characters**Nick Carraway**

- The narrator and a friend of Gatsby
- 30 years old, level-headed, an observer of human nature
- Cousin to Daisy, old acquaintance of Tom, friend to Jay Gatsby, and romantically involved with Jordan Baker
- The only person on Gatsby's side at the end

Jay Gatsby

- Born poor as James Gatz, he reinvents himself and grows wealthy with illegal bootlegging and gambling
- In love with Daisy and, apart from Nick, seems to have no real friends
- Obsessed with self-improvement and with the dreams of his past
- Killed by George in a case of mistaken identity

Daisy Buchanan

- The beautiful, wealthy wife of Tom, she is Gatsby's great love
- Selfish and reliant on male attention
- Betrays Tom with Gatsby and then rejects Gatsby for Tom's wealth and power
- Kills Myrtle Wilson in a hit-and-run car accident

3.4 The Characters: Constellations and Characteristics

Tom Buchanan

- Wealthy upper-class heir
- Arrogant, brutish, racist and violent, treats other people with contempt
- Has an affair with Myrtle
- Indirectly responsible for the deaths of Myrtle, George and Gatsby

Jordan Baker

- A modern young woman and a professional golfer
- Friends with Daisy and Tom, involved with Nick
- Jordan is fundamentally dishonest
- Physically and in her mannerisms Jordan is a symbol of the young feminine ideal of the 1920s

George Wilson

- A car mechanic whose wife is having an affair with Tom
- Poor, ignorant and depressed
- Misinformed by Tom, kills Gatsby and then takes his own life

Myrtle Wilson

- George's wife, a sensual and coarse woman who cheats on her husband with Tom
- Killed by Daisy who is driving a car Myrtle believes to be Tom's

Other persons: Meyer Wolfshiem, Dan Cody, Henry Gatz, "Owl Eyes", Michaelis, Catherine, Klipspringer and Pammy Buchanan.

3.4 The Characters: Constellations and Characteristics

Nick Carraway

Nick is a very interesting character to examine because of his **dual function in the book**. He is not only a character whose motivations and actions are relevant and must be examined, he is, as the narrator, the filter through which the entire story and everything in it must pass. Luckily for the reader, he is both non-judgemental (at least at the beginning; see the opening paragraph of the novel) and thoroughly honest (p. 84 ll. 13–15).

At the opening of the novel Nick says that he was raised to remember that he has had many advantages in his life which other people haven't, and that he should therefore be careful in judging and criticising others (p. 5 ll. 2–7). Nick is conscientious, reserved and self-aware. He thinks about what he does, why he is doing it, and about the consequences of his actions for others: typically modestly, he says "I am slow thinking and full of interior rules that act on my desires", (p. 84 ll. 3–5), which makes him the only "adult" in the novel when compared to the childish and selfish search for pleasure and gratification which seems to motivate the other major characters.

It is **important for Nick to behave correctly**. Daisy has heard that he is engaged to a girl back out west, which is not true (p. 32 ll. 14–27), but he nevertheless feels that he has to get himself "out of that tangle back home [...] there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free" (p. 84 ll. 6–12). This happens again when he feels that he must break off his connection to Jordan when he decides to leave and return to the Midwest – "There was one thing that had to be done before I left, an awkward, unpleasant thing that perhaps had better be let alone. But I wanted to leave things in order and not just trust that obliging and indifferent sea to sweep my refuse away" (p. 228 ll. 15–19). This behaviour is in stark contrast to the casual infidelity of Tom

Decency and respect

Responsible behaviour

3.5 Notes on Themes

3.5 Notes on Themes

There are a number of themes in *The Great Gatsby* which Fitzgerald handles using various situations and characters. These themes are mostly universal, although some are very specific to the world of the novel – to the Jazz Age, and to the USA. The major themes and associated issues are:

- America and the American Dream
- Society and wealth
- The Jazz Age: the modern world
- Desire and the past
- Vision.

America and the American Dream

The American Dream embodies two conflicting yet inseparable elements: the triumph of the human spirit and will, and an obsession with material wealth. Nick admires the former in *Gatsby*, and it seems that it is only in *Gatsby* that these qualities can be found: only he has the hope, the purity of intention, and the ability to dream. But *Gatsby* is corrupted. He is neither fully good nor wholly bad. While his motivations, will power and strength of character are admirable, his methods and means are highly questionable. He becomes rich by feeding off society's addiction to alcohol and gambling.

3.5 Notes on Themes

TEXT	REFERENCE	ANALYSIS
The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. [...] he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.	p. 133 ll. 8–16	Nick describes James Gatz' creation of Gatsby as being an act of Platonic conception (p. 133 ll. 9–10), which refers to the Greek philosopher Plato's theory of there being "ideal" forms above and beyond the changing material, physical forms. This reference expresses the idea that Gatsby created the ideal version of himself – ideal here also meaning, thanks to the link to Plato, not only "best" but also permanent, unchanging. This is a development of the American Dream ideal of self-improvement
[The schedule]	p. 223 l. 8–p. 224 l. 15	Young James Gatz sets himself a strict schedule for self-improvement, a personal American Dream.
"I wouldn't ask too much of her", I ventured. "You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" He looked around him wildly as if the past were [...] just out of reach of his hand. "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before [...]"	p. 149 ll. 4–11	In the ideal version of himself he has created, wealthy, successful Jay Gatsby is frozen in time, a perfect unchanging figure who is supposed to seize a dream of the past and hold it. This self-creation is an extreme form of the self-realisation, the freedom to succeed, which is essential to the American Dream.

3.5 Notes on Themes

The theme of America and American society is also dealt with in the book. For Nick, there is a **big difference between the West and the East**. The East – specifically New York in the novel – is characterised as a place of modernity, mass culture, a faintly surreal world where morals and codes of behaviour are fluid. A familiar theme in the literature of the USA has always been the relationship to the “Old World” to Europe, a theme most thoroughly examined by Henry James¹⁷ in novels like *The Portrait of a Lady*. The idea that there was a freshness and innocence to the young American culture, the New World, which was in danger of being corrupted by contact with the old world, can be seen here in Nick’s experience of the East, which is the region most closely identified with European culture and society (especially the big coastal cities like Boston and New York).

American identities

TEXT	REFERENCE	ANALYSIS
I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.	p. 227 ll. 12–16	Nick’s recollection of his childhood is coloured by nostalgia and the love for familiar, comforting things: this, and his feeling that he and the other characters were unsuited to the East, reflects the novel’s preoccupation with the lost things of the past.

17 1843–1916 American novelist, author of novels including *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Bostonians* and *The Europeans*. James was a literary realist, and his major theme was encounters between Americans and Europe. As a writer he made extensive use of detailed inner monologues to explore consciousness and perception

3.6 Style and Language

3.6 Style and Language

Because Fitzgerald uses a narrator who is himself a character within the novel, he can make use of different “voices” in telling the story and thereby avoid the risk of his narrative being too one-dimensional. The viewpoint (the events being told in hindsight, reconstructed from different sources) also allows Fitzgerald to build and maintain suspense – who *is* Gatsby? Where does his money come from? – as his narrator presents his story in a mosaic-like manner, not always chronological, and not always from the same perspective.

There are patterns of imagery throughout the novel, most importantly the weather, seasons and colours, which provide a constantly-shifting reflection of and commentary on the characters and events.

Seasons and the weather

Here are some examples of how Fitzgerald makes use of the weather to comment on or reflect the mood of the characters or the pressure of events.

3.6 Style and Language

TEXT	REFERENCE	ANALYSIS
I came east, permanently, I thought, in the spring of twenty-two. [...] And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees [...] I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.	p. 9 l. 3–p. 10 l. 4	The story told by Nick begins in Spring, when life begins after the sleep of winter: the story grows out of spring and ends in autumn when natural things begin to die or withdraw to the safety of hibernation. This framing of the corrupt, human events of the story within the order of nature's cyclical structure can be read as an ironic comment on humanity's inability to escape nature, no matter how advanced we become; it also implies hope and freshness and new life, and provides a subtly vast context for the story. The careful use of mythical and magical symbols and references in the novel makes the symbolism of the seasons even more potent.
The late afternoon sky bloomed in the window for a moment like the blue honey of the Mediterranean – then the shrill voice of Mrs. McKee called me back into the room.	p. 50 l. 26–p. 51 l. 3	Nick would like to leave the stuffy, drunken party at Myrtle's apartment. The world outside represents natural calm and beauty (blossoming like a flower, sweet like honey, clear and clean like the blue waters of the Mediterranean) – and above all escape.

3.7 Interpretation

3.7 Interpretation

The Great Gatsby has gone through ups and downs in popularity since publication. There have been two major Hollywood adaptations (in 1974 and 2013) as well as other film versions, and it has had widespread influence in other media. It combines a story which continues to move, excite or fascinate readers with its complex and layered portrait of both a specific era in American society and the development of American myths and ideals. Approaches to the novel have focussed on different aspects. Three major areas of interest are:

- gender – the presentation and interaction of men and women in the novel, which is rich with irony and mythical connotations;
- the idea and ideals of American identity and the myths of The Frontier;
- the modern world of mass culture and consumerism, and the effects it has on society and on individuals.

Reactions to each of these topics are influenced by the society and era from which they are being viewed.

Fitzgerald's use of themes in other works

These themes – gender, the ideals of American identity and the modern world of mass culture and consumerism – are among the most prevalent in Fitzgerald's major works, and it can be very useful when studying *Gatsby* to also read the story collection *All the Sad Young Men* for a similarly sad and doubting examination of the modern world. The novel *Tender is the Night* is an excellent look at aspects of the modern age and lifestyles and their effect on personal relationships. Fitzgerald was a writer who remained true

3.7 Interpretation

to specific themes which interested him and with which he was familiar, and the social and moral issues raised by the changing world of the 1920s dominated his writing up until the end.

Gender

Gender roles and interactions are of considerable interest in *The Great Gatsby*. Daisy is identified with a Siren (a mythological creature who uses her seductive charms to lure men to their doom) and Myrtle is presented as a more physical, sensual woman with a stronger sexual appetite. The male characters in the novel struggle for possession of the women (Daisy and Myrtle), with the exception of Nick, whose relationship to women is very different from Tom's dominant, aggressive attitude and Gatsby's transcendent desire.

Daisy is “excitingly desirable” and is at the centre of the novel's conflict, as her husband and lover struggle to possess her. She is very good at making herself interesting to men:

“I've heard it said that Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean toward her: an irrelevant criticism that makes it no less charming.” (p. 18 ll. 3–6)

And, Jordan suggests, at concealing her own indiscretions:

“They moved with a fast crowd, but she came out with an absolutely perfect reputation. Perhaps because she doesn't drink. It's a great advantage not to drink among hard drinking people. You can hold your tongue and, moreover, you can time any little irregularity of your own so that everybody else is so blind that they don't see or care. Perhaps Daisy never went in for amour at all – and yet there's something in that voice of hers...” (p. 108 ll. 5–13)

4. CRITICAL RECEPTION

The Great Gatsby was considered Fitzgerald's greatest achievement as a writer, but when he died the general consensus was that while he had shown great promise (with *Gatsby*), he had been unable to develop on this early triumph. In spite of praise from other writers, his reputation remained low until, beginning in the 1960s with the mass market distribution of *Gatsby* in a paperback format, he was reintroduced to a broader audience and as a result re-evaluated in several biographies and critical studies. *The Great Gatsby* in particular continues to attract attention, both as a work of American literature which is accessible to repeated and diverse analyses, and as an immensely popular story (with another major Hollywood film adaptation in 2013) which still fascinates and entertains.

Contemporary reviewers were delighted with *The Great Gatsby*, appreciating **Fitzgerald's humour and eye for human details** and the great care he took with the form and structure of the novel. He had been a familiar figure on the literary scene for some time already, and was firmly associated with the Jazz Age – he was referred to as “the philosopher of the flapper”. *Gatsby* proved that he could mature as a writer. He was known for being a witty and astute observer of the young generation, but *Gatsby* took a more mature view of a slightly older group of characters.

The effort he made to tell a story about “his” crowd – the flappers, the Lost Generation – growing up was respected by critics, as was the more innovative structure of the novel. He had always

Respect as a serious writer



TV-production *The Great Gatsby* with Mira Sorvino and Toby Stephens (UK/USA 2000).
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5. MATERIALS

Contemporary reactions

“An author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the school masters of ever afterward.” Fitzgerald’s own words are prophetic. *The Great Gatsby* received positive reviews, but was also treated condescendingly and dismissively. It sold reasonably, but not well enough to satisfy the author or silence his critics. Critical recognition was slow in coming: by the time he died Fitzgerald had largely been forgotten and it was not until the 1960s that the book acquired the status it now has – of a classic of American literature. Almost 80 years later it is required reading around the world.

The *New York Times* review in 1925 continued to identify Fitzgerald as the chronicler of the Jazz Age generation.

“Of the many new writers that sprang into notice with the advent of the post-war period, Scott Fitzgerald has remained the steadiest performer and the most entertaining. Short stories, novels and a play have followed with consistent regularity since he became the philosopher of the flapper with *This Side of Paradise*. With shrewd observation and humor he reflected the Jazz Age. Now he has said farewell to his flappers – perhaps because they have grown up – and is writing of the older sisters that have married. But marriage has not changed their world, only the locale of their parties. [...] his hurt romantics are still seeking that other side of paradise. And it might almost be said that *The Great Gatsby* is the last stage of illusion in this absurd chase. For middle age is certainly creeping up on Mr. Fitzgerald’s flappers.”

6. SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

Unter www.königserläuterungen.de/download finden Sie im Internet zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen.

Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.



Task 1*

Nick says: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.” (Chapter IV) How relevant is this idea to the characters in the novel?

Model answer:

Nick has this thought at the end of Chapter IV, which has taken the reader on a tour of the world of the novel: this panorama of impressions includes a glimpse of Wilson working in the valley of ashes (p.94 ll.26–9) and a list of the fashionable party crowd (pp.85–8), Nick’s introduction to the criminal underworld (pp.96–103) and two different versions of Gatsby’s history (pp.89–94 and 109–111). Nick has also quite explicitly compared the complicated emotional world of Gatsby and Daisy with the “clean, hard, limited” (p.110 l.28) Jordan Baker. This categorisation of people into four groups therefore comes straight after one of the most varied chapters in the novel, in terms of locations and characters, and can be seen as a kind of summary of what Nick and the reader have so far learned. Each of the characters in the novel fits in at least one of these categories.

FOUR CATEGORIES

Pursued

The word “pursued” can mean two things – depending on what is doing the chasing. Daisy is being pursued by Gatsby, whose love drives him to follow her. George Wilson is pursued by poverty and despair, Myrtle is pursued by frustration and the desire for a better life, Gatsby is pursued by his obsessive dreams, and Tom and Nick are both pursued by a vague restlessness. Many characters in the novel are chasing after things: some are pursuing a better life (George and Myrtle), or their dreams (Gatsby and the Wilsons). The crowds who attend Gatsby’s parties are chasing fun and the pleasures of the moment. Wolfshiem, the gambler who manipulates betting on national sports events, is pursuing money. Nick is pursuing some kind of orientation after the First World War.

Tired – busy

The division of people into tired and busy also has different meanings. George Wilson is tired – physically and spiritually exhausted – of his hopeless life in the valley of ashes. Daisy is tired of Tom of his brutish arrogance, and Myrtle is tired of her husband. Nick and Jordan are busy people, alert and active: Nick is trying to establish a career for himself to fill the gap left by the excitement and energy he felt during his military service and Jordan is a professional sportswoman. The idea of being tired is not limited in the novel to physical weariness, but is extended to include the spiritual weariness and lack of direction and motivation which Fitzgerald felt affected his generation.