***The 7 Major Great Gatsby Themes***

[**Money and Materialism**](https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-great-gatsby-theme-materialism-money)**:** Everyone in the novel is money-obsessed, whether they were born with money (Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Nick to a lesser extent), whether they made a fortune (Gatsby), or whether they’re eager for more (Myrtle and George). **So why are the characters so materialistic?** How does their materialism affect their choices? Get a guide to each of the characters’ material motivations and how they shape the novel.

[**Society and Class**](https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-great-gatsby-theme-society-class)**:** Building on the money and materialism theme, the novel draws clear distinctions between the kind of money you have: old money (inherited) or new money (earned). And there is also a clear difference between the lifestyles of the wealthy, who live on Long Island and commute freely to Manhattan, and the working class people stuck in between, mired in Queens. By the end of the novel, our main characters who are not old money (Gatsby, Myrtle, and George) are all dead, while the inherited-money club is still alive. **What does this say about class in Gatsby?** Why is their society so rigidly classist? Learn more about the various social classes in Gatsby and how they affect the novel’s outcome.

[**The American Dream**](https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-great-gatsby-american-dream)**:**The American Dream is the idea anyone can make it in America (e.g. gain fame, fortune, and success) through enough hard work and determination. So is Jay Gatsby an example of the dream? Or does his involvement in crime suggest the Dream isn’t actually real? And where does this leave the Wilsons, who are also eager to improve their lot in life but don’t make it out of the novel alive?**Finally, do the closing pages of the novel endorse the American Dream or write it off as a fantasy?** Learn what the American Dream is and how the novel sometimes believes in it, and sometimes sees it as a reckless fantasy.

[**Love, Desire, and Relationships**](https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-great-gatsby-theme-love-relationships)**:**All of the major characters are driven by love, desire, or both, but only Tom and Daisy’s marriage lasts out of the novel’s five major relationships and affairs. So is love an inherently unstable force? Or do the characters just experience it in the wrong way? Get an in-depth guide to each of Gatsby’s major relationships.

**Death and Failure:**Nick narrates Gatsby two years after the events in question, and since he’s obviously aware of the tragedy awaiting not only Gatsby but Myrtle and George as well, the novel has a sad, reflective, even mournful tone. **Is the novel saying that ambition is inherently dangerous** (especially in a classist society like 1920s America), or is it more concerned with the danger of Gatsby’s intense desire to reclaim the past? Explore those questions here.

**Morality and Ethics:**The novel is full of bad behavior: lying, cheating, physical abuse, crime, and finally murder. Yet none of the characters ever answer to the law, and God is only mentioned as an exclamation, or [briefly projected onto an advertisement](https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-great-gatsby-dr-tj-eckleburg-eyes-symbol). Does the novel push for the need to fix this lack of morality, or does it accept it as the normal state of affairs in the “wild, wild East”?

**The Mutability of Identity:**Mutability just means “subject to change,” so this theme is about how changeable (or not!) personal identity is. **Do people really change?** Or are our past selves always with us? And how would this shape our desire to reclaim parts of our past? Gatsby wants to have it both ways: to change himself from James Gatz into the sophisticated, wealthy Jay Gatsby, but also to preserve his past with Daisy. Does he fail because it’s impossible to change? Because it’s impossible to repeat the past? Or both?

[**The Roaring Twenties**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-great-gatsby/themes/the-roaring-twenties)

F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age" to describe the decade of decadence and prosperity that America enjoyed in the 1920s, which was also known as the Roaring Twenties. After World War I ended in 1918, the United States and much of the rest of the world experienced an enormous economic expansion. The surging economy turned the 1920s into a time of easy money, hard drinking (despite the Prohibition amendment to the Constitution), and…

[**The American Dream**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-great-gatsby/themes/the-american-dream)

The American Dream—that hard work can lead one from rags to riches—has been a core facet of American identity since its inception. Settlers came west to America from Europe seeking wealth and freedom. The pioneers headed west for the same reason. *The Great Gatsby* shows the tide turning east, as hordes flock to New York City seeking stock market fortunes. *The Great Gatsby* portrays this shift as a symbol of the American Dream's corruption. It's…

[**Class (Old Money, New Money, No Money)**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-great-gatsby/themes/class-old-money-new-money-no-money)

*The Great Gatsby* portrays three different social classes: "old money" (Tom and Daisy Buchanan); "new money" (Gatsby); and a class that might be called "no money" (George and Myrtle Wilson). "Old money" families have fortunes dating from the 19th century or before, have built up powerful and influential social connections, and tend to hide their wealth and superiority behind a veneer of civility. The "new

## The American Dream

A study of The Great Gatsby must include a look at The American Dream.

1. A look at The Great Gatsby and the American Dream shows that the quality of the dream had diminished, according to Fitzgerald, and had therefore corrupted American society in the 20’s.
2. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness established the foundation of the American Dream. The ability of common people to own property and grow wealthy through hard work constituted another important aspect of the dream. For Jay Gatsby, all these things are embodied in Daisy Buchanan.
3. The dream, according to Fitzgerald, however, had become corrupted by the desire for ease and comfort. Gatsby’s dream is not realized, not due to a lack of trying, but because the dream itself was not worth achieving, much in the same way the object of the American Dream in the 1920s–ease and material objects–was also not worth achieving.
4. Gatsby’s quest for the American Dream is also symbolized by his longing to repeat the past, to relive greatness from another era, much in the same way that the American Dream as established by the founding fathers could not be revitalized in the hearts of Americans.
5. Fitzgerald’s cynicism and negative views of his society are representative of [modernist writers.](https://www.brighthubeducation.com/high-school-english-lessons/29453-modernism-in-literature/)

**Wealth and Money**

A study of *The Great Gatsby* must include a look at wealth and money.

1. There are two types of wealthy people in *The Great Gatsby*: the established rich, who live in East Egg, and the *nouveau riche* who live in West Egg
2. West-eggers are represented by Gatsby, who obtains immense wealth through bootlegging and other not-so-honest endeavors. His wealth is displayed gaudily through outrageous automobiles, amazing parties, and an incredible mansion.
3. East-eggers are represented by Tom Buchanan. His money has been inherited. He’s morally bankrupt–being an adulterer and a liar. He possesses only superficial knowledge, as evidenced by ridiculous regurgitations of hack scholars, and cares little about whom he destroys through his carelessness.
4. East-eggers and West-eggers have corruptness in common.

SYMBOLISM

**The Eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg**– The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckelburg cast an ominous shadow over the goings-on in the novel. The symbolism behind the eyes, located on a billboard overlooking the Valley of Ashes, is open to interpretation. George Wilson likens them to the eyes of God. The location of the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg looking down on everything that takes place in the Valley of Ashes may represent God looking down on a morally bankrupt wasteland and doing nothing about it. His empty face may represent the [modernist notion](https://www.brighthubeducation.com/high-school-english-lessons/29453-modernism-in-literature/) that God no longer lived, a symbol of the modernists’ distrust of political, religious, and social institutions.

1. **The Valley of Ashes** – The Valley of Ashes, located between West Egg and New York city represents the moral decay associated with the uninhibited desire for wealth. It symbolizes societal decay and the plight of the poor, victims of greed and corruption. The valley can also be linked to WWI battlefields, where existed a no man’s land–full of barbed wire, shrapnel, unexploded mines, and dead bodies–between opposing trenches. World War I influenced the negativity of modernist writers.

**Heat, Automobiles & Eggs**

* 1. **Heat** – The heat becomes oppressive during the climactic scene in the novel. Tom, Daisy, Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby head to the city as tension increases. Nick describes the day as “broiling, almost the last, certainly the warmest of the summer” (102). Daisy complains, “It’s so hot, and everything’s so confused” (106). linking the oppressive heat with the oppressive situation. It’s possible, as well, that the heat is, in some way, symbolic of hell and damnation. It is in chapter 7 that Gatsby’s dream is crushed and Myrtle Wilson’s infidelity is discovered.

1. **Automobiles** – Cars have been regarded as status symbols since Henry Ford rolled out the first Model T in the early 20th century. The automobiles driven by Gatsby and Tom Buchanan symbolize their attributes as well: Gatsby’s car is gaudy and contains all the latest gadgets. Tom refers to it as a “circus wagon” (108). Tom drives a coupe, a high-end, traditional, elegant auto. In addition to the two men, automobiles symbolize recklessness as evidenced by Gatsby’s recklessness with money and the moral recklessness of Daisy as she barrels into Myrtle Wilson, killing her.

**Color Symbolism**

The colors used in *The Great Gatsby* includes white, grey, yellow, red, and green.

* 1. **Green** – Don’t forget that green is the color of money, that Gatsby states that Daisy’s “voice is full of money” (107), a green light shines at the end of Daisy’s dock, and that Jay Gatsby desires wealth as a means to get Daisy. The green light is also associated with the American Dream, something Gatsby cannot achieve.
  2. **Grey** – Everything in the Valley of Ashes is colored with grey dust. It represents lifelessness and hopelessness.
  3. **White** – White normally symbolizes purity. In *The Great Gatsby*, it represents false purity. Jordan and Daisy, not exactly moral pillars, often wear white. Gatsby wears white when meeting Daisy for the first time in five years to give the impression that he has been pure and good, doubtful considering his life of organized crime and bootlegging.
  4. **Yellow/Gold**– Yellow represents corruptness. Gatsby’s car is yellow, a product of his corrupt dealings, as are the spectacles of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. It’s probably not a coincidence that the novel’s most impure character is named after a yellow flower. Gold has earned its place among the all time symbols of corruption and greed, although most wouldn’t mind having more of it.
  5. **Blue** – Blue represents illusions. The first suit Gatsby wears is blue. His gardens are blue. He is separated from Daisy by blue and even his chauffeur wears blue. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckelburg are also blue, Fitzgerald’s [allusion](https://www.brighthubeducation.com/homework-help-literature/36141-allusions-in-frankenstein/) to the illusion that there was an almighty being watching over everyone, a belief widely attacked by modernist writers. Follow the link for more novel study guides.

GATSBY STUDY QUESTIONs

<https://www.buffaloschools.org/cms/lib/NY01913551/Centricity/Domain/1068/GatsbyReadingQuestions.pdf>

study guide

<https://www.ntschools.org/cms/lib/NY19000908/Centricity/Domain/684/thegreatgatsbystudentstudyguide.pdf>

For more on the period of history surrounding the book go here:

<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties>

the author

<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/f-scott-fitzgerald>