

# Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

## The Great Gatsby

### Organizational Patterns in the Text

The book is divided into nine chapters, usually between 15 and 20 pages each. One way the author frames the scenes is within social gatherings, either tea with Daisy, or parties at Gatsby's house. There is a tea party in Chapter I, a party in New York with Tom's mistress in chapter II, a party at Gatsby's house in Chapter III, a description of guests at Gatsby's parties as well as a luncheon with Gatsby in New York in Chapter IV, a tea with Daisy and Gatsby in Chapter V, another party at Gatsby's house in Chapter VI, a tea at Daisy's house and a trip to New York in Chapter VII, a gathering at Mr. Wilson's house in Chapter VIII, and a funeral in Chapter IX. Another way to frame the story is through the trips to New York taken by the characters: Tom with his mistress; Gatsby and Nick; Daisy, Nick, Tom, Gatsby and Jordan, etc. Between each of the party scenes, Nick usually takes over and describes things or situations. The majority of dialogue comes from the gatherings of people.

### Issues Relating to the Study of Literature

#### THEMES

1. *Appearance versus Reality*. People often disguise who they are in order to get what they want  
Gatsby does it in order to get Daisy, Tom does it to get Myrtle and to hide it from Daisy, Jordan does it to get out of any sticky situation, and perhaps Nick does it, though we aren't quite sure why. Is Nick "the only honest man he has ever known?"
2. *Appearance versus Reality*. The things we dream about are generally not as amazing as we anticipate them to be, and often become more real than reality. Gatsby's "green light fantasy" of Daisy. Daisy's love of Gatsby though loving Tom, Jordan's lack of holding on to dreams. What does Nick dream about?
3. *Money*. Money *can* buy me love.  
Most of the characters believe that it can. Gatsby's whole life has been an attempt to get Daisy through money. Tom corrupts Myrtle through giving her money, but knows he could get her or anyone because of his money.
4. *Innocence versus Experience*. Midwesterners in New York City  
None of the characters are native New Yorkers. How do they react to the city? Old money (Tom and Daisy) versus New Money (Gatsby). Are they naive in terms of the city and its affect on people?
5. *Innocence versus Experience*. Are any of the characters innocent? In what way are they all adolescent in their behavior? What does this say about America at the time?  
Nick seems to think no one is innocent but him. He says Tom and Daisy "break things." Is Gatsby innocent in terms of his belief his dreams will come true? Does the American Dream have an influence here?
6. *Accountability*. No one takes responsibility for any actions that occur.

Mr. Wilson, the lowest person on the social strata of *The Great Gatsby*, bears the brunt of everyone else's actions. Gatsby dies at the hands ultimately of Tom and Daisy, and they leave without telling anyone what they have collectively done—murdered two people.

#### CHARACTERIZATION/POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE

How are the different characters (particularly Gatsby and perhaps also Nick) presented to us by Nick? By others in the novel? Notice the tale telling by Jordan and by Gatsby to Nick. The entire story is seen through Nick's eyes. What does he think of it? In what way is our view of the story colored by Nick's portrayal of it? How would Gatsby tell the story? Daisy? Jordan?

#### SETTING/CHRONOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

The setting is in New York in the 1920's. There are a few flashbacks to earlier time periods, before the war, which provide contrasting pictures of the characters in terms of where they are now, in terms both of location and emotional status after WWI.

#### SYMBOLISM

What does Dr. T.J. Eckleburg represent? How do we know? Is there another religion the characters live? Who is the poster child (Gatsby)? The ashes in the valley also represent the stagnant, almost sterility of the characters.

#### TONE

This is something which should be discussed. What is Nick's tone? Does he agree with what the characters are doing? If so, why? and if not, why does he still associate with them? When other characters are telling a story, what is their tone?

## Affective Issues related to *The Great Gatsby*

Students will be able to relate to the behavior of most of the characters, either because they themselves are playing a role to the people around them, or they know someone who is. A class discussion could involve why people pretend to be things they are not, how they do it, and what they gain/lose from doing it.

Additionally, the characters in the book take less responsibility for their actions than probably the students themselves do. A discussion could involve how the characters are juvenile in their behavior towards each other.

Also, a discussion can involve dreams versus reality. Do dreams ever come true? Are they as good as we imagine they will be?

## Vocabulary Issues

Much of the vocabulary is somewhat advanced, however, the meaning can often be determined by context. Here are a few examples of words students might struggle with: vulnerable, hostile levity, feign (an important word here), abortive, languid, bantering, infinitesimal, cynical, libel, egotism, supercilious, contiguous, sumptuous, ectoplasm, strident, tortuously, vacuous, florid, holocaust (but since this book was written before WWII, there is a different connotation than we understand it now).

## Conceptual Issues

Some of the concepts might be a little difficult for students to grasp or handle, but with a class of high school age students, they probably would be okay: there are a couple of extramarital affairs, two murders (Myrtle's in particular is a bit graphic), and a lot of general disillusionment. However, the concepts of being a "poser," or having to be accountable for one's actions, these things are not new to the students.

## Background Knowledge

The most important information for students to understand is about the 1920's in America: what the social and economic situations of people, particularly in New York, were like. Information on the stock market during this time could add insight into Nick's profession. Also important to understand would be information relating to WWI and the general disillusionment that followed. Prohibition is another topic which could be studied, so students understand exactly what Gatsby is doing.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSE STUDENTS

For many students, the sheer wealth, prosperity and opulence of the characters described in the book might be a little unnerving. The world of the "Roaring 20's" is probably a very different world from that of many of the students. However, if the background knowledge is set up, and the focus remains on the themes students will relate to (i.e. appearance v. reality, etc.), they should be able to still have some understanding of the text. Also, children of immigrants would also be able to relate to the idea of the "American Dream" presented in the text.

## Gender Issues

There are only three women given names in the text: Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle. Tom hits Myrtle and cheats on his wife, though he is angry and jealous when it appears she too has a lover. None of the women are particularly strong or admirable, but not many of the men are either. Daisy wants her daughter to grow up to be a "beautiful little fool." A class discussion could involve how the women, despite new found liberations of dress and (perhaps) behavior, were still not entirely free.

## CENTRAL QUESTIONS/ENDURING ISSUES

What did it mean and what does it mean to achieve a dream? How can I achieve my dreams?

How can I take responsibility for my past, while at the same time allowing my actions to improve my future?

## Research Issues/Project Ideas

Lots of research can be done by students on World War I as well as the 1920's. What was the economic situation like in the 20's which led to such prosperity and how did it end? How did "the other half" live in New York City? What the people who were not so rich do? Students could study the geographic progression of wealth on Manhattan Island. Where did it start and where did it go? The Harlem Renaissance, a much different aspect of New York in the 1920's, could be put into conversation with Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's own life could be studied and examined. In what way was his life like the characters he

described? More information on Prohibition and how people got around it could be found and shared. Another idea I received from a teacher is to throw a party, and have the students make invitations as though they were a character. Students could learn how to do the Charleston or the Jitterbug or swing dance at the party. Also, students could tell the story as though they were another character—Daisy, Tom, or Myrtle, for example.

## Informational/Functional Texts

Some fun works on the 1920's are the musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, or the adolescent literature novel *Dave at Night*.

Research texts on 1920's as a social/political era: prohibition, speakeasy's, the Stock Market, etc. Advertisements from the 1920's.

Research texts on WWI, how we got in and got out, how America retreated into itself afterwards.