

INTRO

Wealth is an alluring spectacle. It makes people dream of exceptionalism and endless opportunity. However, such appearances can be illusory, masking tragedy, desolation, and spiritual emptiness. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a concise yet profound novel of sublime beauty the language of which belies the overt story of lost love and money. Instead of merely a mystery or a romance, the astute reader finds a novel in which characters struggle against a tide of existential emptiness, in the case of Gatsby, or are entirely oblivious to the emptiness in their lives—Tom and Daisy. Gatsby searches for the means to solve this void, but his efforts are in vain as he fails to understand the nature of what he allowed to happen to his life. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses imagery, setting, and characterization to explore Nick Carraway's observations of the enigmatic Gatsby to suggest the vacancy in the lives the characters in this novel have subjected themselves.

When Nick Carraway moves to West Egg, he sees Gatsby's house long before he meets the man himself. Fitzgerald **structures** the novel in such a way that gradually reveals to Nick the nature of Gatsby's experience as well as the nature of the milieu in which he lives. During the first few days on West Egg, Nick begins to piece together who Gatsby is. Nick meets Gatsby at one of his parties at Gatsby's mansion. Fitzgerald describes the soiree in lush **image-rich** language: "...buffet tables garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvres" (Fitzgerald 863) and an orchestra with a "pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and violas and cornets and piccolos" (Fitzgerald 863). Nevertheless this party is very impersonal, a point Jordan Baker **ironically** observes when she comments: "And I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy" (Fitzgerald 869). Parties by their nature are social affairs, so it therefore must follow that such events would create and foster meaningful contact. Instead, **though**, Gatsby's party attracts a multitude of nameless, anonymous neighbors who

attend only to eat his food and drink his booze. They do not attend to enjoy his company, but Gatsby doesn't care about any profligate carousing because his party is only a ruse to lure the attendance of Daisy Buchanan, his former paramour for whom he still pines.

Gatsby's hosting of parties to lure in Daisy is not merely a romantic overture; **rather**, it is a passive means to fill an unexplainable void in his life. Gatsby "half expected her to wander into one of his parties" because "he wanted her to see his house," Jordan tells Nick (Fitzgerald 888). Through Jordan Baker's description, Fitzgerald **characterizes** Gatsby as very passive, which puts into perspective Gatsby's reticent and laconic demeanor at his own parties that features behaviors from party-goers that are anything but. Prior to Jordan's revelation, Gatsby was an enigma to Nick and virtually everyone else in the novel as well. Jordan's final entreaty to Nick is that he invite Daisy to his house and then let him come over. This request "[shakes]" (Fitzgerald 888) Nick, but this conversation also reveals Gatsby's "purposeless splendor" (Fitzgerald 888) to the narrator. Nick had conversation with Gatsby earlier in the novel where he observed Gatsby's "elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (Fitzgerald 869) through which Nick suspects something amiss about the titular hero. Suddenly, Nick begins to recognize that what he has seen of Gatsby is purely superficial with an absence of substance.

Nick succeeds in bringing Daisy and Gatsby together, but rather than this event becoming an affirmation of love, it instead becomes an illustration of the desolation that Gatsby has made out of his life. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby looking "pale as dead with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets (Fitzgerald 893), suggesting an **image** of anticipation, nervousness, and discontent. Daisy wanders around Gatsby's house exclaiming that she "love[s] it" (Fitzgerald 896) after Gatsby asks for her thoughts. Fitzgerald through Nick Carraway describes wandering through the house as "wander[ing] through Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons" (Fitzgerald 896), suggesting lush **imagery** of opulent

wealth. Gatsby, though, “hadn’t once ceased looking at Daisy [as] he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes (Fitzgerald 897). **However**, later in this scene, Fitzgerald subtly reveals the tragedy of Gatsby’s experience when Nick observes: “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of the light had not vanished forever....Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one (Fitzgerald 898). Fitzgerald has slowly constructed Gatsby’s **characterization** as one of an empty void, a character who is superficially grand with his pink suit and his “factual imitation” (Fitzgerald 840) house but in spite of his wealth houses a void in his spirit, a void he might suspect but does not comprehend.

Like his house, Gatsby’s persona is a factual imitation. As a young man, James Gatz “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” (Fitzgerald 901). The nature of this commitment is that Gatsby engages himself to a false and vacuous idea. As he constructs his false **persona**, he comes to believe that his attempt to draw Daisy into his life will inevitably succeed. When Nick tells him, “You can’t repeat the past” (Fitzgerald 909), Gatsby responds: “‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” (Fitzgerald 909). He goes on to say: “‘I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,’ he said. ‘She’ll see’” (Fitzgerald 909). In this scene, Fitzgerald depicts Gatsby as a man who has lost who he was as well as his conception of reality. Nick surmises Gatsby is attempting to “recover something, some idea of himself” (Fitzgerald 909), but he senses that Gatsby is failing in this endeavor, observing that Gatsby’s “life had been confused and disoriented since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was”(Fitzgerald 909). Gatsby’s life has been an empty void since Daisy thwarted him. After Gatsby’s death when his father visits the funeral, Nick discovers Gatsby’s youthful potential through the regimented list Gatsby followed when he was a teenager, and this list suggests the

determination and character James Gatz possessed before he transformed into, or rather spiraled into, the Great Gatsby.

Fitzgerald does not identify how the specific nature of his falling out with Daisy motivated him to create a false persona borne of criminality, but that is in fitting with the novel. Fitzgerald structures the novel in such a way that the human experience it suggests is only gradually and perhaps only partially revealed. Nick only receives small bits of information from Gatsby and is forced to infer what Gatsby is experiencing. Ultimately, Gatsby squandered his potential—he fails to win Daisy and he loses his life. This void, though, is at the heart of the novel, and Fitzgerald handles this desolate void as an omnipresent subtext. The symbolism of the Valley of the Ashes suggest a moral wasteland where the harlot Myrtle lives with her spiritually vacant husband in between her carnal trysts with the morally bankrupt Tom Buchanan. The parties Gatsby hosts suggest a plethora of people who are interested in the moment and casual congregations with strangers instead of meaningful relationships with kindred people. At no point does anyone engage any degree reflection or introspection. This subtext fits Gatsby's experience as well. The mysterious impact Daisy has on his life causes him to become a bootlegger who creates a false life and a false persona. Thus, his reason for doing as he does is irrelevant because Fitzgerald is suggesting in the Modern context of the the word modernism that man does not understand what befalls him because truth is unknowable. Man seeks meaning, but he will do so blindly. This is Gatsby's experience. He feels a void he does not understand and he attempts to fill it with superficial presentation to gain the attention of a woman who rejected him in a blind attempt to fill the void he feels but does not understand.

In conclusion, Fitzgerald indirectly suggests that Gatsby has lost who he was but tragically fails to understand this inevitable truth. SUMMATION