

A man in a grey suit and striped tie sits in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. Behind him, a woman in a black dress stands with her arms crossed, looking over her shoulder. The background is a textured, mottled brown.

THE GREAT GATSBY

STUDY GUIDE

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FOR THE NOVEL BY
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Synopsis

“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. . . . And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

—*Ecclesiastes 2:11, 4:4*

Having recently returned from military duty overseas during the Great War, Nick Carraway is restless and tired of his provincial life in the Midwest. He moves East to get into the bond market and soon finds himself living among the wealthy on Long Island.

Nick reacquaints himself with his cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom, and through them he meets the “incurably dishonest” Jordan Baker, for whom he begins to develop a romantic interest. Nick soon learns of Daisy’s deep unhappiness and Tom’s affair with Myrtle Wilson, a married woman. Before long, Nick is drawn inextricably into their lives.

Nick’s next-door neighbor is the extravagantly wealthy, but mysterious, Jay Gatsby. Even at his own lavish parties, Gatsby is the subject of rumors and speculation. Nick learns that Gatsby’s single dream, for which he has amassed all his wealth and possessions, is to win back the love of Daisy Buchanan, with whom he had a relationship some years earlier. Gatsby enlists Nick’s help in reuniting with Daisy, but Gatsby’s single-mindedness becomes his undoing as he seeks to relive the past.

The Great Gatsby is considered a masterpiece of American literature, filled with symbolism and beautiful, well-crafted passages. Through it we are given a glimpse into the characters’ moral emptiness, selfishness, and narcissism.

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3. What is the proximity between the Wilsons' home and the "valley of ashes," or the "waste land?" What do you think this relationship says about their lives?
4. What does Myrtle's sister tell Nick about Gatsby? What impression of Gatsby does this give you?
5. Why does Tom break Myrtle's nose?

Analysis:

6. A *symbol* is something physical that represents something abstract. We identify symbols in literature through the author's emphasis and the author's use of repetition. We understand what symbols mean through the author's tone and imagery.

In the beginning of Chapter 2, considerable time is spent describing the "valley of ashes." What ideas or concepts does one generally associate with ashes? What do you think the "valley of ashes" between West Egg and New York symbolizes?

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7. Many analyses of *The Great Gatsby* suggest that the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are a symbol for God. What evidence in Chapter 2 is there to support this idea? If this is “God” in the novel, what do you think Fitzgerald is saying by depicting God as a man-made advertisement overlooking a valley of ashes?
8. Twice Nick mentions the photograph on the wall of Myrtle’s apartment. How does he characterize or personify the photograph? How is the photograph similar to the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg?
9. The exterior of Myrtle’s apartment is described as “one slice in a long white cake of apartment houses.” What does this positive imagery imply? How does the outward appearance differ from the relationships within? Compare this idea with Christ’s imagery of the Pharisees as “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27, 28). What was Jesus implying through this comparison? How is Myrtle’s apartment, and Tom and Myrtle’s affair, like a “whitewashed tomb”?
10. What books and magazines does Nick find at Myrtle’s apartment? What might the titles of these books and magazines suggest?

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11. *Dramatic irony* is when the reader sees a character's mistakes which the character is unable to see himself. What is ironic about Myrtle's negative attitudes toward the "lower classes"?

12. An author's *tone* is the way he presents his subject matter to readers. Through his use of language, the author can influence the way readers view certain characters or events in a novel. Examine the tone with which Fitzgerald writes about George Wilson. How does he present George Wilson to the reader? Do you think Fitzgerald wishes for readers to sympathize with George Wilson? Explain your answer with examples from the book.

Dig Deeper:

13. Read Matthew 6:25–34. What do these verses tell us about where our priorities should be in our careers, possessions, and relationships?

14. Three times during Chapter 2 Nick finds himself unable to leave the company of Tom and Myrtle. First, when the train stops on the way to New York, then in the taxicab on the way to the apartment, and finally during the party. How is Nick unable to leave in each case?

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Optional Exercises:

- Read and discuss excerpts from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).
- Draw a picture portraying the imagery of the ash heaps and Doctor T.J. Eckleburg.
- Search out scripture passages dealing with marriage and discuss the Biblical view of marriage. Some good starting points are Proverbs 5, Malachi 2:13–16, Ephesians 5:22–33, and Hebrews 13:4.

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5. Fitzgerald shifted to present tense to make the forming of the party more immediate, intense, and exciting.
6. The series of vignettes gives the party a surreal, disjointed feel, as if the reader is pulled from one fantastic scene to another without ever getting a chance to really figure out what is going on. The last paragraphs of the previous chapter have the same feel—as if every time Nick or the reader blinks the scene changes. In Chapter 2 Nick is drunk; in Chapter 3 he appears to be influenced by alcohol, but the party and people seem to be the main intoxicants.
7. The many rumors and stories add mystery to the character. Answers will vary. The reader's interest remains focused on the title character because of the mystery. Questions about Gatsby remain prominent in the reader's mind and drive the story forward.
8. Large parties can be intimate because it's easier to be inconspicuous in a crowd than in a small group.
9. Fitzgerald uses a sarcastic tone when suggesting that the scene became “something significant, elemental and profound,” *only* after Nick had been drinking. He is suggesting that beforehand the party was anything *but* significant.
10. In spite of Nick's insistence that these parties were “merely casual events,” the reader is given the impression that the parties and what happens at them are significant to the story. Fitzgerald might have structured the first three chapters around three different parties to show how miserable all the people were, even in the midst of what should have been happy events.
11. Answers will vary, but may include discussions of loneliness, showing off wealth, boredom, etc. The true reason, not even hinted at yet, is revealed in the next chapter.

Dig Deeper:

12. Proverbs 10:18, 19 applies to those at the party who participated in slanderous rumor and speculation about Gatsby. Proverbs 23:29–35 also applies to almost all of the characters. In the closing scene of the party many, if not most, of the people were sorrowful and/or fighting with each other. The man in the library seemed to have been drinking for a week. The man in the accident, though probably banged up, had difficulty even understanding there had been an accident. The parallels between these verses and the events in the novel so far are remarkably close.
13. Cardinal virtues are ones that all civilized people recognize: common sense, restraint, justice, courage, etc. Nick speaks as if there is something suspicious about having virtue. There is something ironic about this, considering that one usually views vices as suspicious rather than virtues.
14. Answers will vary. We may feel distrustful—often people who most strongly declare their honesty are least to be trusted. However, Nick has so far given no apparent reason for distrust, and may be genuinely stating what he believes to be true.

Chapter 4

Vocabulary:

1. a; 2. c; 3. b; 4. c; 5. b

Questions:

1. Gatsby's car is described with the following phrases: rich cream color; bright with nickel; swollen; monstrous length; terraced; labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns; layers of glass; green leather conservatory; fenders spread like wings; splendid. The automobile is often called the ultimate