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Reader Resources

The Great Gatsby

by F. Scott Fitzgerald



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“Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.”

Preface

The Great Gatsby may be the most popular classic in modern American fiction. Since its publication in 1925, Fitzgerald's masterpiece has become a touchstone for generations of readers and writers, many of whom reread it every few years as a ritual of imaginative renewal. The story of Jay Gatsby's desperate quest to win back his first love reverberates with themes at once characteristically American and universally human, among them the importance of honesty, the temptations of wealth, and the struggle to escape the past. Though *The Great Gatsby* runs to fewer than two hundred pages, there is no bigger read in American literature.

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is a tragic love story, a mystery, and a social commentary on American life. Although it was not a commercial success for Fitzgerald during his lifetime, this lyrical novel has become an acclaimed masterpiece read and taught throughout the world.

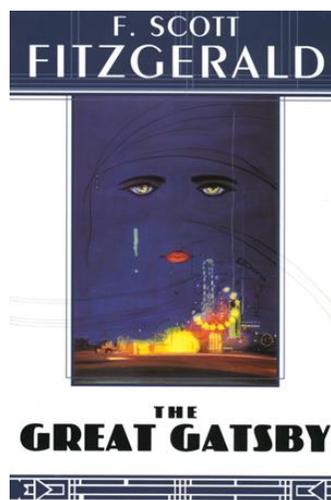
Unfolding in nine concise chapters, *The Great Gatsby* concerns the wasteful lives of four wealthy characters as observed by their acquaintance, narrator Nick Carraway. Like Fitzgerald himself, Nick is from Minnesota, attended an Ivy League university, served in the U.S. Army during World War I, moved to New York after the war, and questions—even while participating in—high society.

Having left the Midwest to work in the bond business in the summer of 1922, Nick settles in West Egg, Long Island, among the nouveau riche epitomized by his next-door neighbor Jay Gatsby. A mysterious man of thirty, Gatsby is the subject of endless fascination to the guests at his lavish all-night parties. He is rumored to be a hero of the Great War. Others say he served as a German spy. Gatsby claims to have attended Oxford University, but the evidence is suspect. As Nick learns more about Gatsby, every detail about him seems questionable, except his love for the charming Daisy Buchanan.

Jay Gatsby's decadent parties are thrown with one goal: to attract Daisy, who lives across the bay in the more fashionable East Egg. From the lawn of his sprawling mansion, Gatsby can see the green light glowing on her dock, which becomes a symbol in the novel of an unreachable treasure, the "future that year by year recedes before us."

Though Daisy is a married socialite and a mother, Gatsby still worships her as his "golden girl." They first met when she was a young lady from an affluent family and he was a working-class military officer. Daisy pledged to wait for his return from the war. Instead she married Tom Buchanan, a wealthy classmate of Nick's. Having obtained a great fortune, Gatsby sets out to win her back again.

A profound indictment of class privilege in the Jazz Age and beyond, *The Great Gatsby* explores the conflict between



decency and self-indulgence. In the novel's conclusion, the characters collide, leaving human wreckage in their wake.

Major Characters in the Book

Nick Carraway

Nick, a young Midwesterner educated at Yale, is the novel's narrator. When he moves to the West Egg area of Long Island, he joins the lavish social world of Tom, Jordan, Gatsby, and his cousin Daisy.

Jay Gatsby

The handsome, mysterious Gatsby, who lives in a mansion next door to Nick's cottage, is known for his lavish parties. Nick, whom he trusts, gradually learns about Gatsby's past and his love for Daisy.

Daisy Buchanan

Beautiful, charming, and spoiled, Daisy is the object of Gatsby's love. Her caprice and materialism lead her to marry Tom Buchanan.

Tom Buchanan

From an enormously wealthy Chicago family, Tom is a former Yale football star who sees himself at the top of an exclusive social hierarchy. He is conceited, violent, racist, and unfaithful.

Jordan Baker

Daisy's friend Jordan epitomizes the modern woman of the 1920s. A liberated, competitive golfer, she is firmly established in high society. She both attracts and repels Nick as a romantic interest.

George Wilson

The owner of an auto garage at the edge of the valley of ashes, George finds his only happiness through his faithless wife, Myrtle.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle dreams of belonging to a higher social class than George can offer. Vivacious and sensual, she hopes her adulterous affair will lead to a life of glamour.

About the Author

F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896–1940: Between Laurels

September 24, 1896: *Into a family that traces its ancestry to the author of "The Star Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald is born in his parents' house on Laurel Avenue in St. Paul, Minnesota.*



F. Scott Fitzgerald, c. 1925
(American Stock/Getty Images)

The Way Up

Although Fitzgerald's father went bankrupt, Fitzgerald still played with the rich kids in town. This paradox would later inform his fiction. His awareness of his situation sharpened during his years at Princeton, where he studied from 1913 to 1917 until he accepted a commission from the U.S. Army. He never saw combat. During World War I, Fitzgerald was stationed near Montgomery, Alabama, where he began revising what became his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920). There he also met the love of his life, Zelda Sayre, the charming, mercurial daughter of a judge. Fitzgerald's early literary successes soon made him and Zelda celebrities of the Jazz Age—a term he coined. During the 1920s, Zelda served as his editor, confidante, and rival. Their appetite for excess made them notorious in an age when excess was the norm. The Fitzgeralds moved to France in 1924 with their young daughter, Frances (nicknamed Scottie), where they fell among a group of American expatriate artists whom the writer Gertrude Stein christened the Lost Generation. In 1925 publisher Charles Scribner's Sons came out with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which has become his most enduring work.

The Way Down

Fitzgerald would not publish another novel for nine years. In 1932, Zelda suffered a breakdown from which she never fully recovered. She spent most of her remaining days in mental institutions. Fitzgerald sold stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire* to keep financially afloat. Implicitly acknowledging his wife's mental illness and his own alcoholism, he drew on their life abroad in the novel *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald relocated to Hollywood in 1937 to write screenplays. His sole screen credit from this period is for the film *Three Comrades* (1938). It joins his other script credit, *Pusher-in-the-Face* (1929), from an earlier California stint. Eventually Fitzgerald began sustained work on his novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Tragically, his end came before the book's did. Several chapters shy of finishing, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in the apartment of his Hollywood companion, columnist Sheilah Graham, while eating a chocolate bar and listening to Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony.

December 21, 1940: *Fitzgerald dies of a heart attack. His final address: 1403 N. Laurel Avenue, Los Angeles, California.*

Historical and Literary Context

The Roaring Twenties

1920

- The 18th Amendment, establishing Prohibition, becomes law.
- The 19th Amendment passes, giving 26 million women the right to vote.
- Warren G. Harding is elected president.

1921

- Charlie Chaplin stars in *The Kid*.
- Coco Chanel introduces Chanel No. 5.
- Rorschach inkblot tests first used.
- "Shoeless" Joe Jackson and others banned from baseball in wake of the "Black Sox" scandal.

1922

- James Joyce's *Ulysses* published.
- T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* published.
- First issue of *Reader's Digest* published.
- Louis Armstrong leaves New Orleans for Chicago to play with King Oliver.
- Dance marathon craze begins.

1923

- First transcontinental nonstop flight takes off from New York and lands in San Diego.
- Jelly Roll Morton makes his first Paramount recordings in Chicago.
- President Harding dies; Calvin Coolidge takes oath of office.

1924

- George Gershwin premieres *Rhapsody in Blue*.
- J. Edgar Hoover appointed director of the Bureau of Investigation, later named the FBI.
- The ten-millionth Model T rolls off the Ford assembly line.
- Colleen Moore plays the title role in the film *The Perfect Flapper*.

1925

- Charles Scribner's Sons publishes *The Great Gatsby*.
- First issue of the *New Yorker* goes to press.
- After John Scopes is charged with teaching from Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Clarence Darrow takes his case.

1926

- The value of bootlegging in the U.S. estimated at \$3.6 billion.
- Benny Goodman records his first solo, "He's the Last Word," with the Ben Pollack Band.
- Henry Ford institutes the 5-day workweek and 8-hour workday.

1927

- *The Jazz Singer* opens as the first talking motion picture.
- Charles Lindbergh lands his *Spirit of St. Louis* in Paris after the first transatlantic flight.
- Ford introduces the Model A.
- Duke Ellington opens a four-year residency at the Cotton Club in New York City.

1928

- Walt Disney makes his first Mickey Mouse silent short, *Plane Crazy*, and succeeds with his second one, *Steamboat Willie*, which was synchronized with sound.
- Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to make a transatlantic flight.
- Herbert Hoover is elected president.

1929

- March 26: The New York Stock Exchange hits a record high, with 8.2 million shares traded.
- The Gerber Co. invents canned baby food.
- Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is published.
- October 29: On Black Tuesday, the stock market crashes.

Other Works/Adaptations

Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age

Most young American veterans of the First World War came home changed by two revelations. One was the horror of trench warfare; the other was their exposure to life in London and Paris, where artists and writers celebrated sheer survival with decadent verve.

Raised by Puritan-minded parents to succeed first at Ivy League universities and then in business, masses of young men and their wives-to-be returned at least mildly shell-shocked by their conflicting experiences.

Despite serving stateside during the war, F. Scott Fitzgerald nevertheless wrote of this disenchantment and its consequences in his greatest works. The nihilism of this Lost Generation is evident from *This Side of Paradise's* concluding page, when Fitzgerald said they had "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."

Americans had two strong and opposite reactions to this state of affairs: The older generation pushed for new laws to control social outbursts, and the new generation rejected those laws, especially the Eighteenth Amendment, which forbade the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Many Americans turned to bootleggers, who illegally either served alcohol smuggled from abroad or distilled their own. In *The Great Gatsby*, the title character's party guests often attribute his extraordinary wealth to bootlegging and other illicit activities.

Introducing the seventieth anniversary edition of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli wrote that the Great War "triggered disillusionment, moral reevaluation, social experimentation, and hedonism.... Although Fitzgerald joined the parties and chronicled them, he wrote in judgment."

Not only was he the most famous writer of the 1920s, Fitzgerald also coined the term *Jazz Age*, which denoted an era of ragtime, jazz, stylish automobiles, and uninhibited young women with bobbed hair and short skirts.

Often called the Roaring Twenties, the postwar decade sometimes appears as one long flamboyant party, where the urban rich danced the Charleston and the foxtrot until 2 a.m. In fact, one might just as convincingly describe it as a period of individual possibility and lofty aspirations to serve the greater good. In his 1931 essay "Echoes of the Jazz Age," Fitzgerald wrote, "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

Fitzgerald and His Other Works

Zelda Sayre refused to marry Fitzgerald unless he could provide for her. Following his honorable discharge from the Army in 1919, he moved to New York alone to revise his manuscript of *This Side of Paradise*. Twice rejected by the publisher Charles Scribner's Sons, the novel amounted to a thinly veiled autobiography of Fitzgerald's Princeton years. When Scribner finally published *This Side of Paradise* in 1920, Fitzgerald won not only literary fame and temporary financial security, but also the hand of his beloved Zelda.

This initial success established a pattern: After every novel, Scribner published a collection of new Fitzgerald short stories. During his lifetime, Fitzgerald was best known as the author of more than 150 stories, originally published in such magazines as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *McCall's*, *Redbook*, and *Esquire*. The collections—*Flappers and Philosophers* (1920), *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), *All the Sad Young Men* (1926), and *Taps at Reveille* (1935)—include such frequently anthologized pieces as "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," "Babylon Revisited," and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair."

In his lifetime, Fitzgerald earned more money from his stories than from all his novels combined. His first *Post* story in 1920 sold for \$400; by 1928, some were bringing in \$3,500 apiece.

These stories provided a way for Fitzgerald to test themes and situations that he would later develop in his novels. For example, literary critics identify four stories from *All the Sad Young Men*—"Absolution," "Winter Dreams," "The Sensible Thing," and "The Rich Boy"—as the "Gatsby-cluster," since he stripped and reused passages from them for his 1925 masterpiece.

High living in Europe and low sales for *Gatsby* silenced Fitzgerald as a novelist for nine years, until he published *Tender Is the Night* in 1934. The novel records the marriage of psychologist Dick Diver and his patient Nicole Warren. As with the emotionally ravaged Anthony and Gloria Patch from his 1922 novel *The Beautiful and The Damned*, readers often interpret Dick and Nicole as alter egos for their author and his wife.

Fitzgerald's final works deal comically and tragically with Hollywood. His college friend and literary editor, Edmund Wilson, edited his unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* for publication in 1941. Its hero, Monroe Stahr, is partly based on Irving Thalberg, MGM's "boy wonder" producer. Fitzgerald's seventeen Pat Hobby stories, written for *Esquire*, chronicle their hapless hero's misadventures as a screenwriter. Scribner published a collection of them posthumously in 1962.

Other posthumous collections include *The Crack-Up* (1945), *The Basil and Josephine Stories* (1973), and *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1989). These and the other books mentioned here demonstrate how much more there is to Fitzgerald than just one book, however great.

Works by F. Scott Fitzgerald

- *This Side of Paradise*, 1920
- *Flappers and Philosophers*, 1920
- *The Beautiful and the Damned*, 1922
- *Tales of the Jazz Age*, 1922
- *The Vegetable*, 1923
- *The Great Gatsby*, 1925
- *All the Sad Young Men*, 1926
- *Tender is the Night*, 1934
- *Taps at Reveille*, 1935

Fitzgerald's only publisher during his lifetime was Charles Scribner's Sons.

Posthumously Published

- *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*. New York: Scribner, 1941. (Originally published under editor Edmund Wilson's title, *The Last Tycoon*.)
- *The Crack-Up*. Ed. Edmund Wilson. New York: New Directions, 1945.
- *The Basil and Josephine Stories*. New York: Scribners, 1973.
- *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Scribners, 1989.

Fitzgerald at the Movies

Fitzgerald's masterpiece has not had the best of luck at the movies. Only the 1974 incarnation, starring Robert Redford as Jay Gatsby—and written by Francis Ford Coppola after Truman Capote failed to deliver—even approaches the poetry of the original. However, despite Redford's artful performance, Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli prefers Alan Ladd's 1949 interpretation of the role, finding Redford too intelligent to capture Gatsby's naiveté.

Fitzgerald's other fiction has fared better on screen. The best and most ambitious adaptation of his work may still be the BBC's award-winning *Tender Is the Night* (1985), scripted by Dennis Potter (*Pennies From Heaven*) and starring Peter Strauss and Mary Steenburgen as Dick and Nicole Diver.

The Fitzgerald story "Teamed With Genius" became a witty TV movie written and directed by Robert Thompson (*Northern Exposure*), featuring a strong lead performance from Christopher Lloyd as the author's comic screenwriter alter ego, Pat Hobby. Joan Micklin Silver (*Hester Street*) wrote and directed an acclaimed TV version of the story "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," starring Shelley Duvall. Even Nobel laureate Harold Pinter's somber feature adaptation of *The Last Tycoon* (1976) for director Elia Kazan has its defenders, and Robert De Niro's delivery of Monroe Stahr's immortal speech about the movies is a showstopper.

Which of the following adaptations deserved the green light?

- *The Great Gatsby* (2013) Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Written by Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce. Starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Gatsby, Carey Mulligan as Daisy, Joel Edgerton as Tom, and Tobey Maguire as Nick.
- *The Great Gatsby* (2000) (TV) Directed by Robert Markowitz. Written by John McLaughlin. Starring Toby Stephens as Gatsby, Mira Sorvino as Daisy, Martin Donovan as Tom, and Paul Rudd as Nick.
- *The Great Gatsby* (1974) Directed by Jack Clayton. Written by Francis Ford Coppola. Starring Robert Redford as Gatsby, Mia Farrow as Daisy, Bruce Dern as Tom, Karen Black as Myrtle, Scott Wilson as Wilson, Sam Waterston as Nick, Lois Chiles as Jordan, and Howard Da Silva as Wolfsheim.
- *The Great Gatsby* (1949) Directed by Elliott Nugent. Written by Cyril Hume and Richard Maibaum. Starring Alan Ladd as Gatsby, Betty Field as Daisy, Macdonald Carey as Nick, Ruth Hussey as Jordan, Barry Sullivan as Tom, Howard Da Silva as Wilson, and Shelley Winters as Myrtle.
- *The Great Gatsby* (1926) Directed by Herbert Brenon. Written by Becky Gardiner from an adaptation by Elizabeth Meehan. Starring Warner Baxter as Gatsby, Lois Wilson as Daisy, Neil Hamilton as Nick, Georgia Hale as Myrtle, and William Powell as Wilson.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel's action occurs in 1922 between June and September. How does Nick's nonchronological narration shape your response to the events surrounding the mystery of Jay Gatsby?
2. Nick believes he is an honest, nonjudgemental narrator. Do you agree?
3. Gatsby believes that the past can be repeated. Is he right?
4. Why does Daisy sob into the "thick folds" of Gatsby's beautiful shirts?
5. What do the faded eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg symbolize? Is there a connection between this billboard and the green light at the end of Daisy's dock?
6. Perhaps the novel's climax occurs when Gatsby confronts Tom in New York. Did Daisy's ultimate choice surprise you? Is it consistent with her character?
7. Do you agree with Nick's final assertion that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together"? Why or why not?
8. How does Fitzgerald foreshadow the tragedies at the end?
9. Does the novel critique or uphold the values of the Jazz Age and the fears of the Lost Generation?
10. Fitzgerald wrote, "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say." What did he have to say in Gatsby?
11. Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli claims: "*The Great Gatsby* does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece." Do you agree?

Additional Resources

Other Works about Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age

- Bruccoli, Matthew J. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. rev. ed. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002.
- Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*. New York: Norton, 1934. Rev. ed. New York: Viking, 1951.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Ed. Andrew Turnbull. New York: Scribner, 1971.
- ---. *The Notebooks of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1978.
- Graham, Sheilah. *College of One*. New York: Viking, 1967.
- Milford, Nancy. *Zelda*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
- Ring, Frances Kroll. *Against the Current: As I Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald*. San Francisco: Ellis/Creative Arts, 1985.

If you're intrigued by the 1920s, you might enjoy reading:

- Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

If you're intrigued by novels about lives of privilege, you might enjoy reading:

- John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934)

If you're intrigued by the Fitzgeralds, you might enjoy Zelda's only novel:

- Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* (1932)

Websites

- [F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary](http://library.sc.edu/spcoll/fitzgerald/)
This website includes biographical information as well as primary sources such as Fitzgerald's ledger.
<http://library.sc.edu/spcoll/fitzgerald/>
- [F. Scott Fitzgerald Society](http://www.fscottfitzgeraldsociety.org/)
An affiliate of the American Literature Association, this international society publishes the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Newsletter and holds conferences.
<http://www.fscottfitzgeraldsociety.org/>
- [American Masters: F. Scott Fitzgerald on PBS.org](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episode_s/f-scott-fitzgerald/essay-the-crack-up/1028/)
Go to the PBS American Masters website to hear author E.L. Doctorow's lecture on Fitzgerald, a career timeline, interviews, and photographs.
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episode_s/f-scott-fitzgerald/essay-the-crack-up/1028/

Credits

Works Cited

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Bruccoli, Matthew J., Preface. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Crack-Up*. ed. Edmund Wilson. New York: New Directions, 1945.

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Acknowledgments

Writers: Jon Peede, David Kipen ("Fitzgerald at the Movies"), Erika Koss, and Dan Stone for the National Endowment for the Arts

Cover image: "1929 Duesenberg Dual-Cowl Phaeton." by Source Interlink Media. Getty.



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