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## 1. AT A GLANCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS

In order for readers to be able to find the most relevant sections quickly and easily, here is a summary and overview of the following book:

Part 2 is an introduction to the author and his works and the contemporary world.

- ⇒ p. 11 ff. → F. Scott Fitzgerald lived 1896–1940 and was considered the chronicler of the Jazz Age.
- ⇒ p. 14 ff. → The 1920s were a period of rapid and profound changes in American society, industry, culture and commercial life.
- ⇒ p. 26 ff. → He wrote novels and short stories about the society around him: his main themes included the promise of youth and the despair of age, and love and wealth.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of various elements of the novel.

### ***The Great Gatsby* – Origins and Sources**

- ⇒ p. 33 ff. → The book was published in 1925.
- It was inspired in part by time the Fitzgeralds spent living on Long Island.
- The book picked up on themes which Fitzgerald had been writing about in his earlier novels and stories.
- During the writing process Fitzgerald knew that *The Great Gatsby* would be his most important work.

## 2.1 Biography

## 2. F. SCOTT FITZGERALD: LIFE &amp; WORKS

## 2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
Sep. 24, 1896	Saint Paul, Minnesota (USA)	Born	
1908–11	St Paul Academy, Saint Paul Minnesota	Student at St Paul Academy.	12–15
1909–11	Newman School, Hackensack New Jersey	First publication: short story <i>The Mystery of the Raymond Mortgage</i> published in the school magazine.	13–15
1911–13	Princeton University, Princeton New Jersey	Attended Catholic prep school (to prepare students for university), and continued to write short stories – three are published in the school magazine – and stage plays, two of which are staged at school.	15–17
1913–17	Kansas, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama and Long Island	Began studying but dropped out in 1917. During his time at Princeton he met future literary figures like Edmund Wilson, and had more stories published in the university magazine.	17–21
1917–19	New York, Saint Paul	Military service. Joined the army after quitting university and was stationed at various army bases around the country. Met and fell in love with Zelda. First novel, <i>The Romantic Egotist</i> , was rejected by the publisher Scribners.	21–23



F. Scott Fitzgerald  
(1896–1940)  
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## 2.2 Contemporary Background

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*The Great Gatsby* was written during the years in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century really began. The old world had died in the First World War, and a new one was being shaped: by the energy and freedom of free market capitalism, rapidly increasing populations and by the breakdown of traditional hierarchies – the Jazz Age.

### The political and social situation

*The Great Gatsby* was written during the years in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century really began. The old world had died in the First World War<sup>1</sup>, and a new one was being shaped: by the energy and freedom of free market capitalism, rapidly increasing populations and great leaps forward in technology and in the availability and quantity of consumer goods; and by **the energy and freedom released by the breakdown of traditional hierarchies** and the emergence of a hedonist, youth-oriented "pop culture" centred on jazz music, parties and sexual liberation. Fitzgerald defined this energy in his 1931 essay *Echoes of the Jazz Age* as "all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War"<sup>2</sup>. This energy was spent on hedonism rather than social activism. As he wrote in 1931, "the events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary [...] It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all."<sup>3</sup>

1 1914–18: The USA became active in 1917 when Germany began attacking ships in the Atlantic.

2 <http://fitzgerald.narod.ru/crackup/056e-eho.htm>

3 *ibid.*

## 2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

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Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote four novels (a fifth was published posthumously) and dozens of short stories. He also published essays and worked on screenplays. Fitzgerald's major work was concerned with people, places and situations with which he was familiar – the East Coast, the aimlessness of young men, love, status, wealth and greed, and the lifestyles of the Jazz Age.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote four novels (a fifth was published posthumously) and dozens of short stories, which varied widely in quality from substantial pieces like *The Diamond as Big as The Ritz* (1922) to lightweight tales produced when money ran short. He also published essays and worked on screenplays while he was living in Hollywood. He adapted one of his short stories (*The Vegetable*, 1923) into a play. Fitzgerald's major work was concerned with people, places and situations with which he was familiar – the East Coast, the aimlessness of young men, love, status, wealth and greed, and the lifestyles of Jazz Age. Here is a brief introduction to other relevant works which had a direct thematic relevance to the ideas he would cover in *The Great Gatsby*.

## 2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

## The novels

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1920	<i>This Side of Paradise</i>
1922	<i>The Beautiful and the Damned</i>
1925	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
1934	<i>Tender is the Night</i>
1941 (posthumous)	<i>The Love of the Last Tycoon</i>

***This Side of Paradise***

Fitzgerald's debut novel reworked his earlier, unpublished attempt, *The Romantic Egotist*. As with most of his work it is autobiographically influenced: Fitzgerald was a writer who wrote about what he knew. The book follows Amory Blaine. Convinced of his shining future, he goes to Princeton, and later serves during the First World War, before failing to marry a wealthy young woman in New York. Having disappointed his own expectations, by the end of the novel Amory is 24, alone, and forced to accept that his own egotistical nature has denied him happiness. The **themes of greed, status and love**, which would always interest Fitzgerald as a writer, are evident here. *Paradise* was a great success and while it did not make him rich, the fame and respect it brought him did allow Fitzgerald to convince Zelda to marry him, and to earn more money for his short stories.

Popular and  
successful



## 3.3 Structure

### 3.3 Structure

The novel is unusual in that it doesn't, strictly speaking, have a single centre: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, or Daisy Buchanan? The storyteller, the tragic central figure, or the focus of the characters' obsessions?

#### Person at the centre

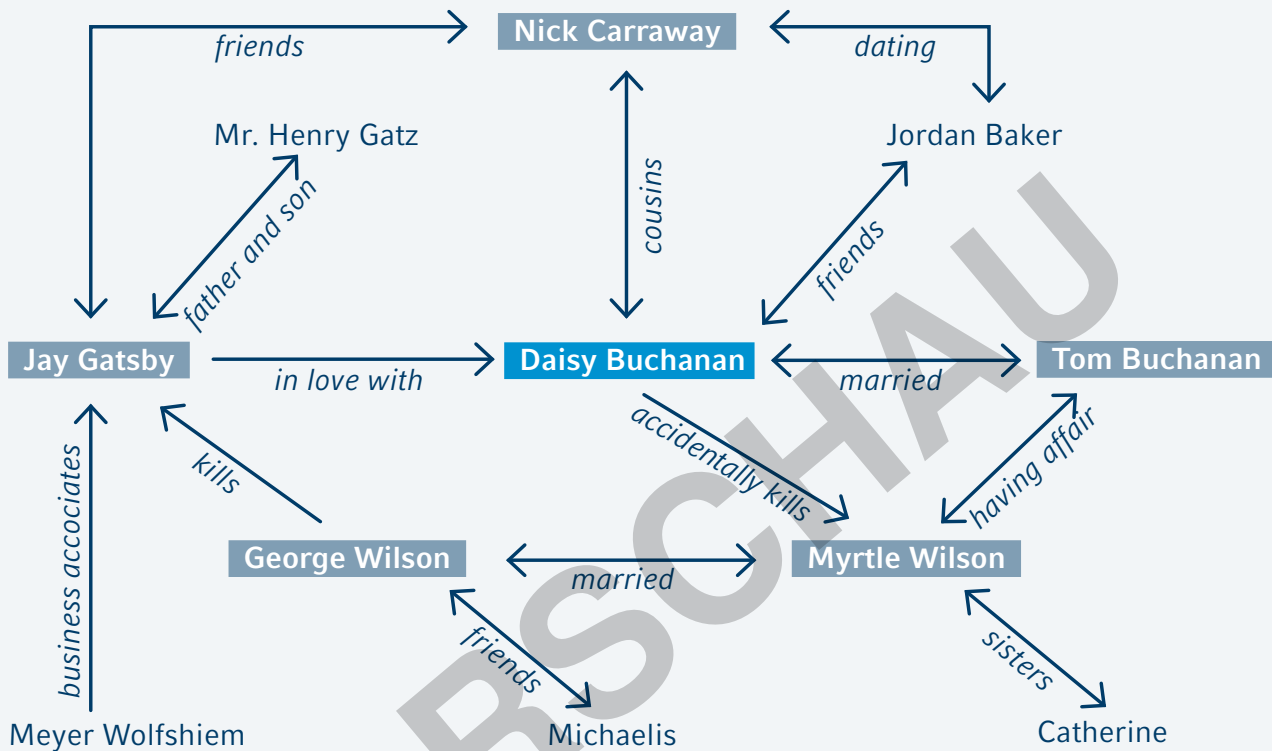
Because Nick is both a character and an observer, and because the entire story is arranged and told by him, he cannot be pushed to the sidelines. But *The Great Gatsby* is not really Nick's story. Despite the events which concern him directly – the relationship with Jordan, for example – **he is intimately involved in someone else's tragedy**. And although the book bears his name, and his story and character is at the heart of the novel, Gatsby is himself just one corner in the love triangle which makes the novel's plot, and his own story is a mystery which forms the background to the events of the summer.

The centre of the  
novel

Considering the network of relationships and the focus of the various obsessions and events in the novel, the most efficient map to include all the characters has Daisy Buchanan, the tragically hollow object and focus of the novel's events, at its centre:

## 3.3 Structure

## Daisy at the centre



- Nick as narrator and Mr Henry Gatz as grieving parent transcend the murky mess of events.
- On the right hand side then are the clear-cut, hard figures: the cynical, sophisticated Jordan, the arrogant, thuggish Tom, and the shallow and crude Myrtle.
- Daisy is the apex of the love triangle: her desirability inspires Gatsby's unreal dreams, and as his wife she is within Tom's possessive sphere.
- Nick is the narrator and as such must be positioned above the others in a position from which, as in the text, he can access their various viewpoints in telling the story.

## 3.5 Notes on Themes

## 3.5 Notes on Themes

There are a number of themes in *The Great Gatsby* which Fitzgerald handles using various situations and characters. These themes are mostly universal, although some are very specific to the world of the novel – to the Jazz Age, and to the USA. The major themes and associated issues are:

- America and the American Dream
- Society and wealth
- The Jazz Age: the modern world
- Desire and the past
- Vision.

### America and the American Dream

The American Dream embodies two conflicting yet inseparable elements: the triumph of the human spirit and will, and an obsession with material wealth. Nick admires the former in Gatsby, and it seems that it is only in Gatsby that these qualities can be found: only he has the hope, the purity of intention, and the ability to dream. But Gatsby is corrupted. He is neither fully good nor wholly bad. While his motivations, will power and strength of character are admirable, his methods and means are highly questionable. He becomes rich by feeding off society's addiction to alcohol and gambling.

## 3.5 Notes on Themes

TEXT	REFERENCE	ANALYSIS
The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. [...] he 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.	p. 133 ll. 8–16	Nick describes James Gatz' creation of Gatsby as being an act of Platonic conception (p. 133 ll. 9–10), which refers to the Greek philosopher Plato's theory of there being "ideal" forms above and beyond the changing material, physical forms. This reference expresses the idea that Gatsby created the ideal version of himself – ideal here also meaning, thanks to the link to Plato, not only "best" but also permanent, unchanging. This is a development of the American Dream ideal of self-improvement
[The schedule]	p. 223 l. 8–p. 224 l. 15	Young James Gatz sets himself a strict schedule for self-improvement, a personal American Dream.
"I wouldn't ask too much of her", I ventured. "You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" He looked around him wildly as if the past were [...] just out of reach of his hand. "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before [...]"	p. 149 ll. 4–11	In the ideal version of himself he has created, wealthy, successful Jay Gatsby is frozen in time, a perfect unchanging figure who is supposed to seize a dream of the past and hold it. This self-creation is an extreme form of the self-realisation, the freedom to succeed, which is essential to the American Dream.

## 3.7 Interpretation

## 3.7 Interpretation

*The Great Gatsby* has gone through ups and downs in popularity since publication. There have been two major Hollywood adaptations (in 1974 and 2013) as well as other film versions, and it has had widespread influence in other media. It combines a story which continues to move, excite or fascinate readers with its complex and layered portrait of both a specific era in American society and the development of American myths and ideals. Approaches to the novel have focussed on different aspects. Three major areas of interest are:

- gender – the presentation and interaction of men and women in the novel, which is rich with irony and mythical connotations;
- the idea and ideals of American identity and the myths of The Frontier;
- the modern world of mass culture and consumerism, and the effects it has on society and on individuals.

Reactions to each of these topics are influenced by the society and era from which they are being viewed.

Fitzgerald's use of themes in other works

These themes – gender, the ideals of American identity and the modern world of mass culture and consumerism – are among the most prevalent in Fitzgerald's major works, and it can be very useful when studying *Gatsby* to also read the story collection *All the Sad Young Men* for a similarly sad and doubting examination of the modern world. The novel *Tender is the Night* is an excellent look at aspects of the modern age and lifestyles and their effect on personal relationships. Fitzgerald was a writer who remained true